

ROBERT BROWNING'S WORKS

CENTENARY EDITION

IN TEN VOLUMES

VOLUME V



Courtesy of the Browning Family

Robert Browning
(aged 62)

From the painting by R. Barrett Browning, 1874,
in the possession of the artist, hitherto unpublished

THE WORKS OF ROBERT BROWNING

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
SIR F. G. KENYON, K.C.B., D.LITT.

VOLUME V—THE
RING AND THE BOOK
BOOKS I—VI



ERNEST BENN LIMITED
LONDON

First published 1912 by Smith Elder & Company

*This edition published by Ernest Benn Limited
Bouverie House • Fleet Street • London • EC4*

Reprinted by Permission of John Murray (Publishers) Ltd., London

Printed in the United States of America

INTRODUCTION

THE RING AND THE BOOK

The Ring and the Book, the crown and centre of Browning's poetic career, conformed to the Horatian maxim, *nonum prematur in annum*. From origin to completion it occupied a period of nearly nine years in Browning's life. It was in June, 1860, that he acquired the "square old yellow book" which provided him with his material; it was in February, 1869, that the last of its four volumes issued from the press. But the whole of this time was not devoted to the poem. As described in the introduction to *Dramatis Personæ*, Browning, after his wife's death, was partly occupied with editing some of her works, partly with the revision of his own poems for the collected edition of 1863, and partly with the composition and preparation for the press of *Dramatis Personæ* itself. Although, as he tells us in the first book of the poem, he had mastered the contents of the "yellow book" within a few hours of its purchase, and had imaged to himself the whole course of the tragic story, it was long before he deliberately embarked on the work of composition. He offered the story, as the subject for a novel, to Miss Ogle;

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he offered it again to Mr. W. C. Cartwright, one of the few survivors to-day of his personal friends. In the summer of 1862, however, he wrote to Miss Blagden in terms which show that he had determined to use it himself as the subject of a great poem. The period of gestation was long, but it ensured his complete mastery of his materials, the creation of a finished and coherent work of art. The main work of composition appears to have begun in the latter part of 1864, when *Dramatis Personæ* was off his hands. The first volume was published in November, 1868, and the other three volumes followed at monthly intervals.

One notable event, of considerable importance for Browning's personal happiness and literary welfare, took place in the same year, namely a change of publisher. Browning had made the acquaintance of Mr. George Murray Smith, the head of the firm of Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co., and thenceforward his poems were published by that house. The first-fruits of the new connection was the six-volume edition of his collected works, published in 1868, which for so many readers has formed the basis of their knowledge of Browning, supplemented from time to time by the later volumes as they successively appeared, but not superseded until the production of the seventeen-volume edition in the last year of the poet's life. The second of Browning's publications to bear this imprint was *The Ring and the Book*.

In the case of few great poems are the materials

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out of which they were produced so definitely and precisely known as they are with regard to *The Ring and the Book*. In the main they were contained in the “square old yellow book,” the acquisition of which at a stall in the Piazza San Lorenzo in Florence is described in affectionate detail in Book I, ll. 33–83. This book, in accordance with the poet’s wishes, was presented after his death to Balliol College, Oxford, by his son, Mr. R. Barrett Browning. It was reproduced in photographic facsimile by the Carnegie Institution of Washington in 1908, under the editorship of Mr. C. W. Hodell; and Mr. Hodell’s translation of its contents has recently been published in an universally accessible form in Messrs. Dent’s *Everyman’s Library* (*The Old Yellow Book . . . translated and edited by Charles W. Hodell [1911]*). A secondary source was a pamphlet sent to Browning by a friend who had found it in London, published in the original Italian by the Philobiblion Society in 1870, and included in an English translation in Messrs. Dent’s volume above mentioned. Another narrative came to light many years after Browning’s death, having been discovered in a volume of trials (including that of Beatrice Cenci) in the Casanatense Library in Rome, by Signor Giorgi, the librarian. A translation of this was published in the *Monthly Review* for November, 1900, by Mr. Hall Griffin, and again as an appendix to his *Life of Robert Browning*; another is given by Mr. Hodell in the volume in *Everyman’s Library*.

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Since the story of Count Guido Franceschini—of his marriage with Pompilia, the supposed daughter of Pietro and Violante Comparini, of his ill-treatment of her, of her flight from Arezzo to Rome in company with the priest Giuseppe Caponsacchi, of their capture and punishment by the courts, of the birth of Pompilia's child, of the murder of the Comparini and Pompilia by Guido and his four assistants, of the trial and execution of the murderers and the vindication of Pompilia's innocence—is told ten times over, from the different standpoints of nine different persons, in the poem itself, it is unnecessary to tell it again here. In every detail Browning adhered closely to his original authorities, but he has made the characters live again by the insight of his genius, and the sordid murder-story of Rome in 1698 has become one of the greatest poems of the nineteenth century, and the climax of Robert Browning's poetical advancement.

The plan of the poem may be told in the words of the present editor's note to the two-volume edition of 1896: "Putting aside the first and last books, which serve as prologue and epilogue, it consists of ten dramatic monologues, in each of which the story of the murder, and of the events and motives which led up to it, is told from a different point of view. Books II and III reproduce the gossip of Rome, first on the side favourable to Guido, and next on that hostile to him,—in both cases incomplete and inaccurate, but serving to introduce the reader to the general facts

INTRODUCTION

of the case. Book IV gives the conversation of aristocratic society, indifferent, cynical, excusing and condemning both parties. The next three books rise to a higher level, alike of poetry and of dramatic interest. The principals are brought upon the stage. In Book V, Count Guido makes his defence before his judges; in Book VI, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, the priest whom Guido charges with being Pompilia's lover, shrivels the accuser's sophistries with his indignant eloquence; in Book VII, Pompilia, dying in the hospital, tells her story in all simplicity and forgivingness. Books VIII and IX are devoted to the speeches of counsel on either side, whose sole object is to display their own ingenuity, without much regard to what their clients may have said; and being full of law Latin and classical allusions may be scarcely intelligible to some readers, and can be omitted without much loss. Book X, on the other hand, is the fine soliloquy of the Pope, to whom, in the last resort, Guido makes appeal; while Book XI shows Guido in his prison, the night before his execution, defiantly haranguing the two ecclesiastics who have been sent to administer to him the consolations of religion." It may be added that the pleadings of the lawyers are very closely modelled on, and in parts translated from, the actual pamphlets written by them which appear in the "old yellow book."

The publication of *The Ring and the Book* marks an epoch in Browning's life in more senses than

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one. It was, definitely and deliberately, his *opus magnum*. He had written no long poem since the ill-fated *Sordello*, and now, with his powers at their full height, trained and tried in a series of shorter poems, he sat down to the production of a work on the epic scale, though still in the manner of dramatic monologue which he had found to be that which set his genius best. And the public received the poem, on the whole, in the spirit in which it was offered to them. The reviews in general welcomed it with cordial praise, and recognized it as one of the great works of the generation. Individuals might like or dislike Browning's poetry, but it was no longer ignored, and Browning was henceforward coupled with Tennyson in the forefront of contemporary English literature, though the day had not yet arrived when he would rival him in actual popularity.

In yet a third sense does *The Ring and the Book* mark an epoch in Browning's poetical career. It sums up what he had hitherto done. Its best books show, on a larger scale than heretofore, his mastery of his own particular method of dramatic monologue. And, on the other hand, it left its mark on all his subsequent work, not wholly, it must be confessed, for its good. The attractions of the long poem grew upon him, and thenceforward, with few exceptions, we have monologues or narratives extending to thousands of lines, in place of lyrics and short dramatic studies, of the scale and calibre of *By the Fireside* or *Andrea del*

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Sarto. The intellectual power is there, with very much of the poetic insight and creative genius, but with less of the concentrating and refining gift which fuses the whole into a great work of art. Browning was nearly fifty-seven when *The Ring and the Book* was published; and few poets, except Milton and Sophocles, have continued to rise to greater heights after the age of sixty. Great as much of the work which followed was, it is no injustice to it to regard *The Ring and the Book* as marking the climax and turning point.

A separate edition of *The Ring and the Book* was published in 1898, with illustrations selected by Mr. W. Hall Griffin, including several photographs of the principal localities mentioned in the poem, taken by himself.

In the original edition of the poem, the lines were numbered; but, by some incomprehensible accident or fancy, half-lines, when printed separately (as in the first line of the poem), were reckoned as units. This numeration has been preserved in all editions, and it would confuse references if it were to be altered now. It is therefore maintained in the present text.

The original manuscript of *The Ring and the Book* is the property of Mrs. George Murray Smith, to whom Browning presented it. With its assistance some misprints in earlier editions (to some of which my attention was called by Prof. A. Platt) have been corrected.

It is a sad coincidence that this volume, which

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contains a reproduction of the poet's portrait by his son, should appear within a few weeks of that son's death ; and it is a cause of sincere grief to those who are responsible for this Centenary Edition, that Mr. R. Barrett Browning should not have lived to see its completion.

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PORTRAITS

ROBERT BROWNING (AGED 62)

<i>From the painting by R. Barrett Browning, 1874, hitherto unpublished</i>	FRONTISPICE
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GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

<i>From the portrait made on the day of his execution</i>	<i>Facing page 194</i>
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THE RING AND THE BOOK

BOOKS I—VI

THE RING AND THE BOOK

1868-9

I.—THE RING AND THE BOOK

Do you see this Ring?

'T is Rome-work, made to match

(By Castellani's imitative craft)

Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,

After a dropping April; found alive

Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-side figtree-roots

That roof old tombs at Chiusi: soft, you see,

Yet crisp as jewel-cutting. There's one trick,

(Craftsmen instruct me) one approved device

And but one, fits such slivers of pure gold

As this was,—such mere oozings from the mine,

Virgin as oval tawny pendent tear

At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow,—

To bear the file's tooth and the hammer's tap:

Since hammer needs must widen out the round,

And file emboss it fine with lily-flowers,

Ere the stuff grow a ring-thing right to wear.

That trick is, the artificer melts up wax

With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold

With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,

Effects a manageable mass, then works:

But his work ended, once the thing a ring,

Oh, there's repristination! Just a spirt

5

10

15

20

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
 And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume ; 25
 While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
 The rondure brave, the lilied loveliness,
 Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore :
 Prime nature with an added artistry—
 No carat lost, and you have gained a ring. 30
 What of it? 'T is a figure, a symbol, say ;
 A thing's sign : now for the thing signified.

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss
 I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about
 By the crumpled vellum covers,—pure crude fact 35
 Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
 And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries
 since?

Examine it yourselves ! I found this book,
 Gave a *lira* for it, eightpence English just,
 (Mark the predestination !) when a Hand, 40
 Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,
 One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm,
 Across a Square in Florence, crammed with booths,
 Buzzing and blaze, noontide and market-time,
 Toward Baccio's marble,—ay, the basement-ledge 45
 O' the pedestal where sits and menaces
 John of the Black Bands with the upright spear,
 'Twixt palace and church,—Riccardi where they
 lived,

His race, and San Lorenzo where they lie.
 This book,—precisely on that palace-step 50
 Which, meant for lounging knaves o' the Medici,
 Now serves re-venders to display their ware,—
 'Mongst odds and ends of ravage, picture-frames
 White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces
 chipped,
 Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests, 55

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

(Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade)

Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,
Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry
Polished and rough, sundry amazing busts
In baked earth, (broken, Providence be praised !) 60
A wreck of tapestry, proudly-purposed web
When reds and blues were indeed red and blue,
Now offered as a mat to save bare feet
(Since carpets constitute a cruel cost)

Treading the chill scagliola bedward : then 65
A pile of brown-etched prints, two *crazie* each,
Stopped by a conch a-top from fluttering forth
—Sowing the Square with works of one and the
same

Master, the imaginative Sienese
Great in the scenic backgrounds—(name and fame 70
None of you know, nor does he fare the worse :)
From these . . . Oh, with a Lionard going cheap
If it should prove, as promised, that Joconde
Whereof a copy contents the Louvre !—these
I picked this book from. Five compeers in flank 75
Stood left and right of it as tempting more—
A dogseared Spicilegium, the fond tale
O' the Frail One of the Flower, by young Dumas,
Vulgarized Horace for the use of schools,
The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody, 80
Saint Somebody Else, his Miracles, Death and
Life,—

With this, one glance at the lettered back of which,
And “Stall !” cried I : a *lira* made it mine.

Here it is, this I toss and take again ;
Small-quarto size, part print part manuscript : 85
A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries
since.

Give it me back! The thing 's restorative
I' the touch and sight.

90

That memorable day,
(June was the month, Lorenzo named the Square)

I leaned a little and overlooked my prize
By the low railing round the fountain-source
Close to the statue, where a step descends :
While clinked the cans of copper, as stooped and
rose

95

Thick-ankled girls who brimmed them, and made
place

For marketmen glad to pitch basket down,
Dip a broad melon-leaf that holds the wet,
And whisk their faded fresh. And on I read
Presently, though my path grew perilous
Between the outspread straw-work, piles of plait
Soon to be flapping, each o'er two black eyes
And swathe of Tuscan hair, on festas fine :
Through fire-irons, tribes of tongs, shovels in
sheaves,

100

Skeleton bedsteads, wardrobe-drawers agape,
Rows of tall slim brass lamps with dangling
gear,—

And worse, cast clothes a-sweetening in the sun :
None of them took my eye from off my prize.

Still read I on, from written title-page
To written index, on, through street and street,
At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at the Bridge ;

110

Till, by the time I stood at home again
In Casa Guidi by Felice Church,
Under the doorway where the black begins
With the first stone-slab of the staircase cold,
I had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth

115

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Gathered together, bound up in this book,
Print three-fifths, written supplement the rest.

“*Romana Homicidiorum*”—nay, 120
Better translate—“A Roman murder-case :
“Position of the entire criminal cause
“Of Guido Franceschini, nobleman,
“With certain Four the cutthroats in his pay,
“Tried, all five, and found guilty and put to death 125
“By heading or hanging as befitted ranks,
“At Rome on February Twenty Two,
“Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight :
“Wherein it is disputed if, and when,
“Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet 'scape 130
“The customary forfeit.”

Word for word,
So ran the title-page : murder, or else
Legitimate punishment of the other crime,
Accounted murder by mistake,—just that 135
And no more, in a Latin cramp enough
When the law had her eloquence to launch,
But interfilleted with Italian streaks
When testimony stooped to mother-tongue,—
That, was this old square yellow book about. 140

Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged,
Lay gold, (beseech you, hold that figure fast !)
So, in this book lay absolutely truth,
Fanciless fact, the documents indeed,
Primary lawyer-pleadings for, against, 145
The aforesaid Five ; real summed-up circumstance
Adduced in proof of these on either side,
Put forth and printed, as the practice was,
At Rome, in the Apostolic Chamber's type,
And so submitted to the eye o' the Court 150
Presided over by His Reverence

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

Rome's Governor and Criminal Judge,—the trial
Itself, to all intents, being then as now

Here in the book and nowise out of it;

Seeing, there properly was no judgment-bar,

155

No bringing of accuser and accused,

And whoso judged both parties, face to face

Before some court, as we conceive of courts.

There was a Hall of Justice; that came last:

For Justice had a chamber by the hall

160

Where she took evidence first, summed up the
same,

Then sent accuser and accused alike,

In person of the advocate of each,

To weigh its worth, thereby arrange, array

The battle. 'T was the so-styled Fisc began,

165

Pleaded (and since he only spoke in print

The printed voice of him lives now as then)

The public Prosecutor—"Murder's proved;

"With five . . . what we call qualities of bad,

"Worse, worst, and yet worse still, and still worse
yet;

170

"Crest over crest crowning the cockatrice

"That beggar hell's regalia to enrich

"Count Guido Franceschini: punish him!"

Thus was the paper put before the court

In the next stage, (no noisy work at all,) 175

To study at ease. In due time like reply

Came from the so-styled Patron of the Poor,

Official mouthpiece of the five accused

Too poor to fee a better,—Guido's luck

Or else his fellows',—which, I hardly know,—

180

An outbreak as of wonder at the world,

A fury-fit of outraged innocence,

A passion of betrayed simplicity:

"Punish Count Guido? For what crime, what hint

"O' the colour of a crime, inform us first!

185

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

“ Reward him rather ! Recognize, we say,
“ In the deed done, a righteous judgment dealt !
“ All conscience and all courage,—there 's our
Count
“ Chartered in a word ; and, what's more strange,
“ He had companionship in privilege, 190
“ Found four courageous conscientious friends :
“ Absolve, applaud all five, as props of law,
“ Sustainers of society !—perchance
“ A trifle over-hasty with the hand
“ To hold her tottering ark, had tumbled else ; 195
“ But that 's a splendid fault whereat we wink,
“ Wishing your cold correctness sparkled so !”
Thus paper second followed paper first,
Thus did the two join issue—nay, the four,
Each pleader having an adjunct. “ True, he killed 200
“ —So to speak—in a certain sort—his wife,
“ But laudably, since thus it happed !” quoth one :
Whereat, more witness and the case postponed.
“ Thus it happed not, since thus he did the deed,
“ And proved himself thereby portentousest 205
“ Of cutthroats and a prodigy of crime,
“ As the woman that he slaughtered was a saint,
“ Martyr and miracle !” quoth the other to match :
Again, more witness, and the case postponed.
“ A miracle, ay—of lust and impudence ; 210
“ Hear my new reasons !” interposed the first :
“ —Coupled with more of mine !” pursued his peer.
“ Beside, the precedents, the authorities !”
From both at once a cry with an echo, that !
That was a firebrand at each fox's tail 215
Unleashed in a cornfield : soon spread flare enough,
As hurtled thither and there heaped themselves
From earth's four corners, all authority
And precedent for putting wives to death,
Or letting wives live, sinful as they seem. 220

How legislated, now, in this respect,
 Solon and his Athenians? Quote the code
 Of Romulus and Rome! Justinian speak!
 Nor modern Baldo, Bartolo be dumb!
 The Roman voice was potent, plentiful; 225
Cornelia de Sicariis hurried to help
Pompeia de Parricidiis; *Julia de*
 Something-or-other jostled *Lex* this-and-that;
 King Solomon confirmed Apostle Paul:
 That nice decision of Dolabella, eh? 230
 That pregnant instance of Theodoric, oh!
 Down to that choice example *Ælian* gives
 (An instance I find much insisted on)
 Of the elephant who, brute-beast though he were,
 Yet understood and punished on the spot 235
 His master's naughty spouse and faithless friend;
 A true tale which has edified each child,
 Much more shall flourish favoured by our court!
 Pages of proof this way, and that way proof,
 And always—once again the case postponed. 240

Thus wrangled, brangled, jangled they a month,
 —Only on paper, pleadings all in print,
 Nor ever was, except i' the brains of men,
 More noise by word of mouth than you hear now—
 Till the court cut all short with “Judged, your
 cause. 245

“Receive our sentence! Praise God! We pro-
 nounce

“Count Guido devilish and damnable:
 “His wife Pompilia in thought, word and deed,
 “Was perfect pure, he murdered her for that:
 “As for the Four who helped the One, all
 Five— 250

“Why, let employer and hirelings share alike
 “In guilt and guilt's reward, the death their due!”

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

So was the trial at end, do you suppose?

“Guilty you find him, death you doom him to?”

“Ay, were not Guido, more than needs, a priest,

“Priest and to spare!”—this was a shot reserved;

I learn this from epistles which begin

Here where the print ends,—see the pen and ink

Of the advocate, the ready at a pinch!—

“My client boasts the clerky privilege,

260

“Has taken minor orders many enough,

“Shows still sufficient chrism upon his pate

“To neutralize a blood-stain: *presbyter*,

“*Prima tonsura, subdiaconus*,

“*Sacerdos*, so he slips from underneath

265

“Your power, the temporal, slides inside the robe

“Of mother Church: to her we make appeal

“By the Pope, the Church’s head!”

A parlous plea,

Put in with noticeable effect, it seems;

270

“Since straight,”—resumes the zealous orator,

Making a friend acquainted with the facts,—

“Once the word ‘clericality’ let fall,

“Procedure stopped and freer breath was drawn

“By all considerate and responsible Rome.”

275

Quality took the decent part, of course;

Held by the husband, who was noble too:

Or, for the matter of that, a churl would side

With too-refined susceptibility,

And honour which, tender in the extreme,

280

Stung to the quick, must roughly right itself

At all risks, not sit still and whine for law

As a Jew would, if you squeezed him to the wall,

Brisk-trotting through the Ghetto. Nay, it seems,

Even the Emperor’s Envoy had his say

285

To say on the subject; might not see, unmoved,

Civility menaced throughout Christendom

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

By too harsh measure dealt her champion here.
 Lastly, what made all safe, the Pope was kind,
 From his youth up, reluctant to take life,
 If mercy might be just and yet show grace ;
 Much more unlikely then, in extreme age,
 To take a life the general sense bade spare.
 'T was plain that Guido would go scatheless yet.

290

But human promise, oh, how short of shine !
 How topple down the piles of hope we rear !
 How history proves . . . nay, read Herodotus !
 Suddenly starting from a nap, as it were,
 A dog-sleep with one shut, one open orb,
 Cried the Pope's great self,—Innocent by name
 And nature too, and eighty-six years old,
 Antonio Pignatelli of Naples, Pope
 Who had trod many lands, known many deeds,
 Probed many hearts, beginning with his own,
 And now was far in readiness for God,—
 'T was he who first bade leave those souls in
 peace,
 Those Jansenists, re-nicknamed Molinists,
 ('Gainst whom the cry went, like a frowsy tune,
 Tickling men's ears—the sect for a quarter of an
 hour
 I' the teeth of the world which, clown-like, loves
 to chew
 Be it but a straw 'twixt work and whistling-while,
 Taste some vituperation, bite away,
 Whether at marjoram-sprig or garlic-clove,
 Aught it may sport with, spoil, and then spit forth)
 "Leave them alone," bade he, "those Molinists !"
 "Who may have other light than we perceive,
 "Or why is it the whole world hates them thus ?"
 Also he peeled off that last scandal-rag
 Of Nepotism ; and so observed the poor

295

300

305

310

315

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

That men would merrily say, "Halt, deaf and blind,"

320

"Who feed on fat things, leave the master's self

"To gather up the fragments of his feast,

"These be the nephews of Pope Innocent!—

"His own meal costs but five carlines a day,

"Poor-priest's allowance, for he claims no more." 325

—He cried of a sudden, this great good old Pope,
When they appealed in last resort to him,

"I have mastered the whole matter: I nothing doubt.

"Though Guido stood forth priest from head to heel,

"Instead of, as alleged, a piece of one,—

330

"And further, were he, from the tonsured scalp

"To the sandaled sole of him, my son and Christ's,

"Instead of touching us by finger-tip

"As you assert, and pressing up so close

"Only to set a blood-smutch on our robe,—

335

"I and Christ would renounce all right in him.

"Am I not Pope, and presently to die,

"And busied how to render my account,

"And shall I wait a day ere I decide

"On doing or not doing justice here?" 340

"Cut off his head to-morrow by this time,

"Hang up his four mates, two on either hand,

"And end one business more!"

So said, so done—

Rather so writ, for the old Pope bade this,

345

I find, with his particular chirograph,

His own no such infirm hand, Friday night;

And next day, February Twenty Two,

Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight,

—Not at the proper head-and-hanging-place

350

On bridge-foot close by Castle Angelo,

Where custom somewhat staled the spectacle,
('T was not so well i' the way of Rome, beside,
The noble Rome, the Rome of Guido's rank)
But at the city's newer gayer end,—

355

The cavalcading promenading place
Beside the gate and opposite the church
Under the Pincian gardens green with Spring,
'Neath the obelisk 'twixt the fountains in the Square,
Did Guido and his fellows find their fate,
All Rome for witness, and—my writer adds—
Remonstrant in its universal grief,
Since Guido had the suffrage of all Rome.

360

This is the bookful ; thus far take the truth,
The untempered gold, the fact untampered with, 365
The mere ring-metal ere the ring be made !
And what has hitherto come of it? Who preserves
The memory of this Guido, and his wife
Pompilia, more than Ademollo's name,
The etcher of those prints, two *crazie* each, 370
Saved by a stone from snowing broad the Square
With scenic backgrounds? Was this truth of force?
Able to take its own part as truth should,
Sufficient, self-sustaining? Why, if so—
Yonder 's a fire, into it goes my book, 375
As who shall say me nay, and what the loss?
You know the tale already : I may ask,
Rather than think to tell you, more thereof,—
Ask you not merely who were he and she,
Husband and wife, what manner of mankind, 380
But how you hold concerning this and that
Other yet-unnamed actor in the piece.
The young frank handsome courtly Canon, now,
The priest, declared the lover of the wife,
He who, no question, did elope with her, 385
For certain bring the tragedy about,

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Giuseppe Caponsacchi ;—his strange course
I' the matter, was it right or wrong or both ?
Then the old couple, slaughtered with the wife
By the husband as accomplices in crime,
Those Comparini, Pietro and his spouse,—
What say you to the right or wrong of that,
When, at a known name whispered through the
door

390

Of a lone villa on a Christmas night,
It opened that the joyous hearts inside
Might welcome as it were an angel-guest
Come in Christ's name to knock and enter, sup
And satisfy the loving ones he saved ;
And so did welcome devils and their death ?

395

I have been silent on that circumstance

400

Although the couple passed for close of kin
To wife and husband, were by some accounts
Pompilia's very parents : you know best.

Also that infant the great joy was for,
That Gaetano, the wife's two-weeks' babe,
The husband's first-born child, his son and heir,
Whose birth and being turned his night to day—
Why must the father kill the mother thus
Because she bore his son and saved himself ?

405

Well, British Public, ye who like me not,
(God love you !) and will have your proper laugh
At the dark question, laugh it ! I laugh first.
Truth must prevail, the proverb vows ; and truth
—Here is it all i' the book at last, as first
There it was all i' the heads and hearts of Rome
Gentle and simple, never to fall nor fade
Nor be forgotten. Yet, a little while,
The passage of a century or so,
Decads thrice five, and here 's time paid his tax,
Oblivion gone home with her harvesting,

410

415

420

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

And all left smooth again as scythe could shave.
Far from beginning with you London folk,
I took my book to Rome first, tried truth's power
On likely people. "Have you met such names?
"Is a tradition extant of such facts?" 425
"Your law-courts stand, your records frown a-row:
"What if I rove and rummage?" "—Why,
you 'll waste
"Your pains and end as wise as you began!"
Everyone snickered: "names and facts thus old
"Are newer much than Europe news we find 430
"Down in to-day's *Diario*. Records, quotha?
"Why, the French burned them, what else do
the French?
"The rap-and-rending nation! And it tells
"Against the Church, no doubt,—another gird
"At the Temporality, your Trial, of course?" 435
"—Quite otherwise this time," submitted I;
"Clean for the Church and dead against the
world,
"The flesh and the devil, does it tell for once."
"—The rarer and the happier! All the same,
"Content you with your treasure of a book, 440
"And waive what 's wanting! Take a friend's
advice!
"It 's not the custom of the country. Mend
"Your ways indeed and we may stretch a point:
"Goget youmanned by Manning and new-manned
"By Newman and, mayhap, wise-manned to boot 445
"By Wiseman, and we 'll see or else we won't!
"Thanks meantime for the story, long and strong,
"A pretty piece of narrative enough,
"Which scarce ought so to drop out, one would
think,
"From the more curious annals of our kind. 450
"Do you tell the story, now, in off-hand style,

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

“Straight from the book? Or simply here and there,

“(The while you vault it through the loose and large)

“Hang to a hint? Or is there book at all,

“And don’t you deal in poetry, make-believe,

“And the white lies it sounds like?”

455

Yes and no!

From the book, yes; thence bit by bit I dug
The lingot truth, that memorable day,

Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold,— 460

Yes; but from something else surpassing that,

Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,
Made it bear hammer and be firm to file.

Fancy with fact is just one fact the more;

To-wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced,

465

Thridded and so thrown fast the facts else free,
As right through ring and ring runs the djereed

And binds the loose, one bar without a break.

I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,

Before attempting smithcraft, on the night

470

After the day when,—truth thus grasped and
gained,—

The book was shut and done with and laid by
On the cream-coloured massive agate, broad
'Neath the twin cherubs in the tarnished frame
O' the mirror, tall thence to the ceiling-top. 475

And from the reading, and that slab I leant

My elbow on, the while I read and read,

I turned, to free myself and find the world,

And stepped out on the narrow terrace, built

Over the street and opposite the church,

480

And paced its lozenge-brickwork sprinkled cool;

Because Felice-church-side stretched, a-glow

Through each square window fringed for festival,

Whence came the clear voice of the cloistered ones
 Chanting a chant made for midsummer nights— 485
 I know not what particular praise of God,
 It always came and went with June. Beneath
 I' the street, quick shown by openings of the sky
 When flame fell silently from cloud to cloud,
 Richer than that gold snow Jove rained on Rhodes, 490
 The townsmen walked by twos and threes, and
 talked,
 Drinking the blackness in default of air—
 A busy human sense beneath my feet :
 While in and out the terrace-plants, and round
 One branch of tall datura, waxed and waned 495
 The lamp-fly lured there, wanting the white flower.
 Over the roof o' the lighted church I looked
 A bowshot to the street's end, north away
 Out of the Roman gate to the Roman road
 By the river, till I felt the Apennine. 500
 And there would lie Arezzo, the man's town,
 The woman's trap and cage and torture-place,
 Also the stage where the priest played his part,
 A spectacle for angels,—ay, indeed,
 There lay Arezzo ! Farther then I fared, 505
 Feeling my way on through the hot and dense,
 Romeward, until I found the wayside inn
 By Castelnuovo's few mean hut-like homes
 Huddled together on the hill-foot bleak,
 Bare, broken only by that tree or two 510
 Against the sudden bloody splendour poured
 Cursewise in day's departure by the sun
 O'er the low house-roof of that squalid inn
 Where they three, for the first time and the last,
 Husband and wife and priest, met face to face. 515
 Whence I went on again, the end was near,
 Step by step, missing none and marking all,
 Till Rome itself, the ghastly goal, I reached.

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Why, all the while,—how could it otherwise?—
The life in me abolished the death of things,
Deep calling unto deep : as then and there
Acted itself over again once more

The tragic piece. I saw with my own eyes
In Florence as I trod the terrace, breathed
The beauty and the fearfulness of night,
How it had run, this round from Rome to Rome—
Because, you are to know, they lived at Rome,
Pompilia's parents, as they thought themselves,
Two poor ignoble hearts who did their best
Part God's way, part the other way than God's,
To somehow make a shift and scramble through
The world's mud, careless if it splashed and
spoiled,

Provided they might so hold high, keep clean
Their child's soul, one soul white enough for three,
And lift it to whatever star should stoop,
What possible sphere of purer life than theirs
Should come in aid of whiteness hard to save.

I saw the star stoop, that they strained to touch,
And did touch and depose their treasure on,
As Guido Franceschini took away

Pompilia to be his for evermore,

While they sang “Now let us depart in peace,
“Having beheld thy glory, Guido's wife!”

I saw the star supposed, but fog o' the fen,
Gilded star-fashion by a glint from hell ;

Having been heaved up, haled on its gross way,
By hands unguessed before, invisible help
From a dark brotherhood, and specially
Two obscure goblin creatures, fox-faced this,

Cat-clawed the other, called his next of kin
By Guido the main monster,—cloaked and caped,
Making as they were priests, to mock God more,—
Abate Paul, Canon Girolamo.

520

525

530

535

540

545

550

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

These who had rolled the starlike pest to Rome
 And stationed it to suck up and absorb
 The sweetness of Pompilia, rolled again
 That bloated bubble, with her soul inside,
 Back to Arezzo and a palace there—
 Or say, a fissure in the honest earth

555

Whence long ago had curled the vapour first,
 Blown big by nether fires to appal day :

560

It touched home, broke, and blasted far and wide.
 I saw the cheated couple find the cheat
 And guess what foul rite they were captured for,—
 Too fain to follow over hill and dale

565

That child of theirs caught up thus in the cloud
 And carried by the Prince o' the Power of the Air
 Whither he would, to wilderness or sea.

I saw them, in the potency of fear,
 Break somehow through the satyr-family
 (For a grey mother with a monkey-mien,
 Mopping and mowing, was apparent too,
 As, confident of capture, all took hands
 And danced about the captives in a ring)

570

—Saw them break through, breathe safe, at Rome
 again,

575

Saved by the selfish instinct, losing so
 Their loved one left with haters. These I saw,
 In recrudescency of baffled hate,
 Prepare to wring the uttermost revenge
 From body and soul thus left them : all was sure, 580
 Fire laid and cauldron set, the obscene ring traced,
 The victim stripped and prostrate : what of God ?
 The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash,
 Quenched lay their cauldron, cowered i' the dust
 the crew,

As, in a glory of armour like Saint George,
 Out again sprang the young good beauteous priest
 Bearing away the lady in his arms,

585

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Saved for a splendid minute and no more.

For, whom i' the path did that priest come upon,
He and the poor lost lady borne so brave,

590

—Checking the song of praise in me, had else

Swelled to the full for God's will done on earth—

Whom but a dusk misfeatured messenger,

No other than the angel of this life,

Whose care is lest men see too much at once.

595

He made the sign, such God-glimpse must suffice,

Nor prejudice the Prince o' the Power of the Air,

Whose ministration piles us overhead

What we call, first, earth's roof and, last, heaven's
floor,

Now grate o' the trap, then outlet of the cage :

600

So took the lady, left the priest alone,

And once more canopied the world with black.

But through the blackness I saw Rome again,

And where a solitary villa stood

In a lone garden-quarter : it was eve,

605

The second of the year, and oh so cold !

Ever and anon there flittered through the air

A snow-flake, and a scanty couch of snow

Crusted the grass-walk and the garden-mould.

All was grave, silent, sinister,—when, ha ?

610

Glimmeringly did a pack of were-wolves pad

The snow, those flames were Guido's eyes in front,

And all five found and footed it, the track,

To where a threshold-streak of warmth and light

Betrayed the villa-door with life inside,

615

While an inch outside were those blood-bright eyes,

And black lips wrinkling o'er the flash of teeth,

And tongues that lolled—Oh God that madest

man !

They parleyed in their language. Then one
whined—

That was the policy and master-stroke—

620

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

Deep in his throat whispered what seemed a name—

“Open to Caponsacchi!” Guido cried :

“Gabriel!” cried Lucifer at Eden-gate.

Wide as a heart, opened the door at once,

Showing the joyous couple, and their child

625

The two-weeks’ mother, to the wolves, the wolves

To them. Close eyes! And when the corpses lay

Stark-stretched, and those the wolves, their wolf-work done,

Were safe-embosomed by the night again,

I knew a necessary change in things ;

630

As when the worst watch of the night gives way,

And there comes duly, to take cognizance,

The scrutinizing eye-point of some star—

And who despairs of a new daybreak now?

Lo, the first ray protruded on those five!

635

It reached them, and each felon writhed transfixed.

Awhile they palpitated on the spear

Motionless over Tophet : stand or fall ?

“I say, the spear should fall—should stand, I say!”

Cried the world come to judgment, granting grace

640

Or dealing doom according to world’s wont,

Those world’s-bystanders grouped on Rome’s cross-road

At prick and summons of the primal curse

Which bids man love as well as make a lie.

There prattled they, discoursed the right and wrong,

645

Turned wrong to right, proved wolves sheep and sheep wolves,

So that you scarce distinguished fell from fleece ;

Till out spoke a great guardian of the fold,

Stood up, put forth his hand that held the crook,

And motioned that the arrested point decline :

650

Horribly off, the wriggling dead-weight reeled,

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Rushed to the bottom and lay ruined there.
Though still at the pit's mouth, despite the smoke
O' the burning, tarriers turned again to talk
And trim the balance, and detect at least 655
A touch of wolf in what showed whitest sheep,
A cross of sheep redeeming the whole wolf,—
Vex truth a little longer :—less and less,
Because years came and went, and more and more
Brought new lies with them to be loved in turn. 660
Till all at once the memory of the thing,—
The fact that, wolves or sheep, such creatures
were,—
Which hitherto, however men supposed,
Had somehow plain and pillar-like prevailed
I' the midst of them, indisputably fact, 665
Granite, time's tooth should grate against, not
graze,—
Why, this proved sandstone, friable, fast to fly
And give its grain away at wish o' the wind.
Ever and ever more diminutive,
Base gone, shaft lost, only entablature, 670
Dwindled into no bigger than a book,
Lay of the column ; and that little, left
By the roadside 'mid the ordure, shards and weeds.
Until I haply, wandering that lone way,
Kicked it up, turned it over, and recognized, 675
For all the crumblement, this abacus,
This square old yellow book,—could calculate
By this the lost proportions of the style.

This was it from, my fancy with those facts,
I used to tell the tale, turned gay to grave,
But lacked a listener seldom ; such alloy,
Such substance of me interfused the gold 680
Which, wrought into a shapely ring therewith,
Hammered and filed, fingered and favoured, last

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

Lay ready for the renovating wash 685
 O' the water. "How much of the tale was true?"
 I disappeared ; the book grew all in all ;
 The lawyers' pleadings swelled back to their size,—
 Doubled in two, the crease upon them yet,
 For more commodity of carriage, see !— 690
 And these are letters, veritable sheets
 That brought posthaste the news to Florence, writ
 At Rome the day Count Guido died, we find,
 To stay the craving of a client there,
 Who bound the same and so produced my book. 695
 Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse ?
 Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale ?

Well, now ; there 's nothing in nor out o' the world
 Good except truth : yet this, the something else,
 What 's this then, which proves good yet seems
 untrue ? 700

This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
 That quickened, made the inertness malleolable
 O' the gold was not mine,—what 's your name for
 this ?

Are means to the end, themselves in part the end ?
 Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too ? 705
 The somehow may be thishow.

I find first

Writ down for very A B C of fact,
 " In the beginning God made heaven and earth " ;
 From which, no matter with what lisp, I spell 710
 And speak you out a consequence—that man,
 Man,—as befits the made, the inferior thing,—
 Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn,
 Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow,—
 Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain 715
 The good beyond him,—which attempt is growth,—
 Repeats God's process in man's due degree,

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Attaining man's proportionate result,—

Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps.

Inalienable, the arch-prerogative

720

Which turnst thought, act—conceives, expresses too!

No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free,

May so project his surplusage of soul

In search of body, so add self to self

By owning what lay ownerless before,—

725

So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms—

That, although nothing which had never life

Shall get life from him, be, not having been,

Yet, something dead may get to live again,

Something with too much life or not enough,

730

Which, either way imperfect, ended once :

An end whereat man's impulse intervenes,

Makes new beginning, starts the dead alive,

Completes the incomplete and saves the thing.

Man's breath were vain to light a virgin wick,—

735

Half-burned-out, all but quite-quenched wicks o' the lamp

Stationed for temple-service on this earth,

These indeed let him breathe on and relume !

For such man's feat is, in the due degree,

—Mimic creation, galvanism for life,

740

But still a glory portioned in the scale.

Why did the mage say,—feeling as we are wont

For truth, and stopping midway short of truth,

And resting on a lie,—“I raise a ghost”?

“Because,” he taught adepts, “man makes not man.

745

“ Yet by a special gift, an art of arts,

“ More insight and more oversight and much more

“ Will to use both of these than boast my mates,

“ I can detach from me, commission forth

“ Half of my soul ; which in its pilgrimage

750

“ O'er old unwandered waste ways of the world,

“ May chance upon some fragment of a whole,
 “ Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse,
 “ Smoking flax that fed fire once : prompt therein
 “ I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play, 755
 “ Push lines out to the limit, lead forth last
 “ (By a moonrise through a ruin of a crypt)
 “ What shall be mistily seen, murmuringly heard,
 “ Mistakenly felt : then write my name with
 Faust’s ! ”

Oh, Faust, why Faust ? Was not Elisha once ?— 760
 Who bade them lay his staff on a corpse-face.

There was no voice, no hearing : he went in
 Therefore, and shut the door upon them twain,
 And prayed unto the Lord : and he went up
 And lay upon the corpse, dead on the couch, 765
 And put his mouth upon its mouth, his eyes
 Upon its eyes, his hands upon its hands,
 And stretched him on the flesh ; the flesh waxed
 warm :

And he returned, walked to and fro the house,
 And went up, stretched him on the flesh again, 770
 And the eyes opened. ’T is a credible feat
 With the right man and way.

Enough of me !

The Book ! I turn its medicinal leaves
 In London now till, as in Florence erst, 775
 A spirit laughs and leaps through every limb,
 And lights my eye, and lifts me by the hair,
 Letting me have my will again with these
 —How title I the dead alive once more ?

Count Guido Franceschini the Aretine,
 Descended of an ancient house, though poor,
 A beak-nosed bushy-bearded black-haired lord,
 Lean, pallid, low of stature yet robust,
 Fifty years old,—having four years ago

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Married Pompilia Comparini, young, 785
Good, beautiful, at Rome, where she was born,
And brought her to Arezzo, where they lived
Unhappy lives, whatever curse the cause,—
This husband, taking four accomplices,
Followed this wife to Rome, where she was fled 790
From their Arezzo to find peace again,
In convoy, eight months earlier, of a priest,
Aretine also, of still nobler birth,
Giuseppe Caponsacchi,—caught her there
Quiet in a villa on a Christmas night, 795
With only Pietro and Violante by,
Both her putative parents ; killed the three,
Aged, they, seventy each, and she, seventeen,
And, two weeks since, the mother of his babe
First-born and heir to what the style was worth 800
O' the Guido who determined, dared and did
This deed just as he purposed point by point.
Then, bent upon escape, but hotly pressed,
And captured with his co-mates that same night,
He, brought to trial, stood on this defence— 805
Injury to his honour caused the act ;
And since his wife was false, (as manifest
By flight from home in such companionship,)
Death, punishment deserved of the false wife
And faithless parents who abetted her 810
I' the flight aforesaid, wronged nor God nor man.
"Nor false she, nor yet faithless they," replied
The accuser ; "cloaked and masked this murder
glooms ;
"True was Pompilia, loyal too the pair ;
"Out of the man's own heart a monster curled 815
"Which—crime coiled with connivancy at crime—
"His victim's breast, he tells you, hatched and
reared ;
"Uncoil we and stretch stark the worm of hell !"

A month the trial swayed this way and that
 Ere judgment settled down on Guido's guilt ; 820
 Then was the Pope, that good Twelfth Innocent,
 Appealed to: who well weighed what went before,
 Affirmed the guilt and gave the guilty doom.

Let this old woe step on the stage again !
 Act itself o'er anew for men to judge, 825
 Not by the very sense and sight indeed—
 (Which take at best imperfect cognizance,
 Since, how heart moves brain, and how both
 move hand,
 What mortal ever in entirety saw ?)
 —No dose of purer truth than man digests, 830
 But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now,
 Not strong meat he may get to bear some day—
 To-wit, by voices we call evidence,
 Uproar in the echo, live fact deadened down,
 Talked over, bruited abroad, whispered away, 835
 Yet helping us to all we seem to hear :
 For how else know we save by worth of word ?

Here are the voices presently shall sound
 In due succession. First, the world's outcry
 Around the rush and ripple of any fact 840
 Fallen stonewise, plumb on the smooth face of
 things ;
 The world's guess, as it crowds the bank o' the
 pool,
 At what were figure and substance, by their splash :
 Then, by vibrations in the general mind,
 At depth of deed already out of reach. 845
 This threefold murder of the day before,—
 Say, Half-Rome's feel after the vanished truth ;
 Honest enough, as the way is : all the same,
 Harbouring in the centre of its sense

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

A hidden germ of failure, shy but sure,850
To neutralize that honesty and leave
That feel for truth at fault, as the way is too.
Some prepossession such as starts amiss,
By but a hair's breadth at the shoulder-blade,
The arm o' the feeler, dip he ne'er so bold ;855
So leads arm waveringly, lets fall wide
O' the mark its finger, sent to find and fix
Truth at the bottom, that deceptive speck.
With this Half-Rome,—the source of swerving,
call
Over-belief in Guido's right and wrong860
Rather than in Pompilia's wrong and right :
Who shall say how, who shall say why ? 'T is
there—
The instinctive theorizing whence a fact
Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look.
Gossip in a public place, a sample-speech.865
Some worthy, with his previous hint to find
A husband's side the safer, and no whit
Aware he is not Æacus the while,—
How such an one supposes and states fact
To whosoever of a multitude870
Will listen, and perhaps prolong thereby
The not-unpleasant flutter at the breast,
Born of a certain spectacle shut in
By the church Lorenzo opposite. So, they lounge
Midway the mouth o' the street, on Corso side,875
'Twixt palace Fiano and palace Ruspoli,
Linger and listen ; keeping clear o' the crowd,
Yet wishful one could lend that crowd one's eyes,
(So universal is its plague of squint)
And make hearts beat our time that flutter false :880
—All for the truth's sake, mere truth, nothing
else !
How Half-Rome found for Guido much excuse.

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

Next, from Rome's other half, the opposite feel
 For truth with a like swerve, like unsuccess,—
 Or if success, by no skill but more luck 885
 This time, through siding rather with the wife,
 Because a fancy-fit inclined that way,
 Than with the husband. One wears drab, one
 pink ;
 Who wears pink, ask him “Which shall win the
 race,
 “Of coupled runners like as egg and egg ? ” 890
 “—Why, if I must choose, he with the pink scarf.”
 Doubtless for some such reason choice fell here.
 A piece of public talk to correspond
 At the next stage of the story ; just a day
 Let pass and new day brings the proper change. 895
 Another sample-speech i' the market-place
 O' the Barberini by the Capucins ;
 Where the old Triton, at his fountain-sport,
 Bernini's creature plated to the paps,
 Puffs up steel sleet which breaks to diamond dust, 900
 A spray of sparkles snorted from his conch,
 High over the caritellas, out o' the way
 O' the motley merchandizing multitude.
 Our murder has been done three days ago,
 The frost is over and gone, the south wind laughs, 905
 And, to the very tiles of each red roof
 A-smoke i' the sunshine, Rome lies gold and glad :
 So, listen how, to the other half of Rome,
 Pompilia seemed a saint and martyr both !

Then, yet another day let come and go,
 With pause preclusive still of novelty,
 Hear a fresh speaker !—neither this nor that
 Half-Rome aforesaid ; something bred of both :
 One and one breed the inevitable three.
 Such is the personage harangues you next ; 915

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

The elaborated product, *tertium quid*:

Rome's first commotion in subsidence gives
The curd o' the cream, flower o' the wheat, as it were,
And finer sense o' the city. Is this plain?

You get a reasoned statement of the case,

920

Eventual verdict of the curious few

Who care to sift a business to the bran

Nor coarsely bolt it like the simpler sort.

Here, after ignorance, instruction speaks;

925

Here, clarity of candour, history's soul,

The critical mind, in short: no gossip-guess.

What the superior social section thinks,

In person of some man of quality

Who,—breathing musk from lace-work and
brocade,

His solitaire amid the flow of frill,

930

Powdered peruke on nose, and bag at back,

And cane dependent from the ruffled wrist,—

Harangues in silvery and selectest phrase

'Neath waxlight in a glorified saloon

Where mirrors multiply the girandole:

935

Courting the approbation of no mob,

But Eminence This and All-Illustrious That

Who take snuff softly, range in well-bred ring,

Card-table-quitters for observance' sake,

Around the argument, the rational word—

940

Still, spite its weight and worth, a sample-speech.

How Quality dissertated on the case.

Somuch for Rome and rumour; smoke comes first:

Once let smoke rise untroubled, we descry

Clearlier what tongues of flame may spire and spit

945

To eye and ear, each with appropriate tinge

According to its food, or pure or foul.

The actors, no mere rumours of the act,

Intervene. First you hear Count Guido's voice,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

In a small chamber that adjoins the court,
Where Governor and Judges, summoned thence,
Tommati, Venturini and the rest,
Find the accused ripe for declaring truth. 950

Soft-cushioned sits he; yet shifts seat, shirks touch,
As, with a twitchy brow and wincing lip 955
And cheek that changes to all kinds of white,
He proffers his defence, in tones subdued
Near to mock-mildness now, so mournful seems
The obtuser sense truth fails to satisfy ;
Now, moved, from pathos at the wrong endured, 960
To passion ; for the natural man is roused
At fools who first do wrong then pour the blame
Of their wrong-doing, Satan-like, on Job.
Also his tongue at times is hard to curb ;
Incisive, nigh satiric bites the phrase, 965
Rough-raw, yet somehow claiming privilege
—It is so hard for shrewdness to admit
Folly means no harm when she calls black white !
—Eruption momentary at the most,
Modified forthwith by a fall o' the fire, 970
Sage acquiescence ; for the world 's the world,
And, what it errs in, Judges rectify :
He feels he has a fist, then folds his arms
Crosswise and makes his mind up to be meek.
And never once does he detach his eye 975
From those ranged there to slay him or to save,
But does his best man's-service for himself,
Despite,—what twitches brow and makes lip
wince,—
His limbs' late taste of what was called the Cord,
Or Vigil-torture more facetiously. 980
Even so ; they were wont to tease the truth
Out of loth witness (toying, trifling time)
By torture : 't was a trick, a vice of the age,
Here, there and everywhere, what would you have?

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Religion used to tell Humanity 985
She gave him warrant or denied him course.
And since the course was much to his own mind,
Of pinching flesh and pulling bone from bone
To unhusk truth a-hiding in its hulls,
Nor whisper of a warning stopped the way, 990
He, in their joint behalf, the burly slave,
Bestirred him, mauled and maimed all recusants,
While, prim in place, Religion overlooked ;
And so had done till doomsday, never a sign
Nor sound of interference from her mouth, 995
But that at last the burly slave wiped brow,
Let eye give notice as if soul were there,
Muttered “ ‘T is a vile trick, foolish more than vile,
“ Should have been counted sin ; I make it so :
“ At any rate no more of it for me— 1000
“ Nay, for I break the torture-engine thus ! ”
Then did Religion start up, stare amain,
Look round for help and see none, smile and say
“ What, broken is the rack ? Well done of thee !
“ Did I forget to abrogate its use ? 1005
“ Be the mistake in common with us both !
“ —One more fault our blind age shall answer for,
“ Down in my book denounced though it must be
“ Somewhere. Henceforth find truth by milder
means ! ”
Ah but, Religion, did we wait for thee 1010
To ope the book, that serves to sit upon,
And pick such place out, we should wait indeed !
That is all history : and what is not now,
Was then, defendants found it to their cost.
How Guido, after being tortured, spoke. 1015
Also hear Caponsacchi who comes next,
Man and priest—could you comprehend the coil !—
In days when that was rife which now is rare.

How, mingling each its multifarious wires,
Now heaven, now earth, now heaven and earth at
once,

Had plucked at and perplexed their puppet here,
Played off the young frank personable priest ;
Sworn fast and tonsured plain heaven's celibate,
And yet earth's clear-accepted servitor,
A courtly spiritual Cupid, squire of dames
By law of love and mandate of the mode.

The Church's own, or why parade her seal,
Wherefore that chrism and consecrative work ?

Yet verily the world's, or why go badged

A prince of sonneteers and lutanists,

Show colour of each vanity in vogue

Borne with decorum due on blameless breast ?

All that is changed now, as he tells the court
How he had played the part excepted at ;

Tells it, moreover, now the second time :

Since, for his cause of scandal, his own share
I' the flight from home and husband of the wife,

He has been censured, punished in a sort

By relegation,—exile, we should say,

To a short distance for a little time,—

Whence he is summoned on a sudden now,

Informed that she, he thought to save, is lost,

And, in a breath, bidden re-tell his tale,

Since the first telling somehow missed effect,

And then advise in the matter. There stands he, 1045

While the same grim black-panelled chamber
blinks

As though rubbed shiny with the sins of Rome

Told the same oak for ages—wave-washed wall

Against which sets a sea of wickedness.

There, where you yesterday heard Guido speak,

Speaks Caponsacchi ; and there face him too

Tommati, Venturini and the rest

1020

1025

1030

1035

1040

1045

1050

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Who, eight months earlier, scarce repressed the
smile,

Forewent the wink ; waived recognition so
Of peccadillos incident to youth,

Especially youth high-born ; for youth means love,
Vows can't change nature, priests are only men,
And love likes stratagem and subterfuge

Which age, that once was youth, should recognize,
May blame, but needs not press too hard upon.

Here sit the old Judges then, but with no grace
Of reverend carriage, magisterial port :

For why ? The accused of eight months since,—
the same

Who cut the conscious figure of a fool,
Changed countenance, dropped bashful gaze to
ground,

While hesitating for an answer then,—

Now is grown judge himself, terrifies now

This, now the other culprit called a judge,

Whose turn it is to stammer and look strange,
As he speaks rapidly, angrily, speech that smites :

And they keep silence, bear blow after blow,

Because the seeming-solitary man,

Speaking for God, may have an audience too,

Invisible, no discreet judge provokes.

How the priest Caponsacchi said his say.

Then a soul sighs its lowest and its last
After the loud ones,—so much breath remains
Unused by the four-days'-dying ; for she lived
Thus long, miraculously long, 't was thought,
Just that Pompilia might defend herself.

How, while the hireling and the alien stoop,
Comfort, yet question,—since the time is brief,
And folk, allowably inquisitive,
Encircle the low pallet where she lies

1055

1060

1065

1070

1075

1080

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

In the good house that helps the poor to die,— 1085
 Pompilia tells the story of her life.
 For friend and lover,—leech and man of law
 Do service; busy helpful ministrants
 As varied in their calling as their mind,
 Temper and age: and yet from all of these, 1090
 About the white bed under the arched roof,
 Is somehow, as it were, evolved a one,—
 Small separate sympathies combined and large,
 Nothings that were, grown something very much:
 As if the bystanders gave each his straw, 1095
 All he had, though a trifle in itself,
 Which, plaited all together, made a Cross
 Fit to die looking on and praying with,
 Just as well as if ivory or gold.
 So, to the common kindness she speaks, 1100
 There being scarce more privacy at the last
 For mind than body: but she is used to bear,
 And only unused to the brotherly look.
 How she endeavoured to explain her life.

Then, since a Trial ensued, a touch o' the same 1105
 To sober us, flustered with frothy talk,
 And teach our common sense its helplessness.
 For why deal simply with divining-rod,
 Scrape where we fancy secret sources flow,
 And ignore law, the recognized machine, 1110
 Elaborate display of pipe and wheel
 Framed to unchoke, pump up and pour apace
 Truth till a flowery foam shall wash the world?
 The patent truth-extracting process,—ha?
 Let us make that grave mystery turn one wheel, 1115
 Give you a single grind of law at least!
 One orator, of two on either side,
 Shall teach us the puissance of the tongue
 —That is, o' the pen which simulated tongue

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

On paper and saved all except the sound 1120
Which never was. Law's speech beside law's
thought ?

That were too stunning, too immense an odds :
That point of vantage law lets nobly pass.
One lawyer shall admit us to behold
The manner of the making out a case, 1125
First fashion of a speech ; the chick in egg,
The masterpiece law's bosom incubates.
How Don Giacinto of the Arcangeli,
Called Procurator of the Poor at Rome,
Now advocate for Guido and his mates,— 1130
The jolly learned man of middle age,
Cheek and jowl all in laps with fat and law,
Mirthful as mighty, yet, as great hearts use,
Despite the name and fame that tempt our flesh,
Constant to that devotion of the hearth, 1135
Still captive in those dear domestic ties !—
How he,—having a cause to triumph with,
All kind of interests to keep intact,
More than one efficacious personage
To tranquillize, conciliate and secure, 1140
And above all, public anxiety
To quiet, show its Guido in good hands,—
Also, as if such burdens were too light,
A certain family-feast to claim his care,
The birthday-banquet for the only son— 1145
Paternity at smiling strife with law—
How he brings both to buckle in one bond ;
And, thick at throat, with waterish under-eye,
Turns to his task and settles in his seat
And puts his utmost means in practice now : 1150
Wheezes out law-phrase, whiffles Latin forth,
And, just as though roast lamb would never be,
Makes logic levigate the big crime small :
Rubs palm on palm, rakes foot with itchy foot,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

Conceives and inchoates the argument,
 Sprinkling each flower appropriate to the time, 1155
 —Ovidian quip or Ciceronian crank,
 A-bubble in the larynx while he laughs,
 As he had fritters deep down frying there.
 How he turns, twists, and tries the oily thing
 Shall be—first speech for Guido 'gainst the Fisc. 1160

Then with a skip as it were from heel to head,
 Leaving yourselves fill up the middle bulk
 O' the Trial, reconstruct its shape august,
 From such exordium clap we to the close ; 1165
 Give you, if we dare wing to such a height,
 The absolute glory in some full-grown speech
 On the other side, some finished butterfly,
 Some breathing diamond-flake with leaf-gold fans,
 That takes the air, no trace of worm it was,
 Or cabbage-bed it had production from. 1170
 Giovambattista o' the Bottini, Fisc,
 Pompilia's patron by the chance of the hour,
 To-morrow her persecutor,—composite, he,
 As becomes who must meet such various calls—
 Odds of age joined in him with ends of youth. 1175
 A man of ready smile and facile tear,
 Improvised hopes, despairs at nod and beck,
 And language—ah, the gift of eloquence !
 Language that goes, goes, easy as a glove,
 O'er good and evil, smoothens both to one. 1180
 Rashness helps caution with him, fires the straw,
 In free enthusiastic careless fit,
 On the first proper pinnacle of rock
 Which offers, as reward for all that zeal, 1185
 To lure some bark to founder and bring gain :
 While calm sits Caution, rapt with heavenward eye,
 A true confessor's gaze, amid the glare
 Beaconing to the breaker, death and hell.

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

“ Welldone, thou goodand faithful!” she approves: 1190
“ Hadst thou let slip a faggot to the beach,
“ The crew might surely spy thy precipice
“ And save their boat; the simple and the slow
“ Might so, forsooth, forestall the wrecker’s fee!
“ Let the next crew be wise and hail in time!” 1195
Just so compounded is the outside man,
Blue juvenile pure eye and pippin cheek,
And brow all prematurely soiled and seamed
With sudden age, bright devastated hair.
Ah, but you miss the very tones o’ the voice, 1200
The scrannel pipe that screams in heights of head,
As, in his modest studio, all alone,
The tall wight stands a-tilt, strives and strains,
Both eyes shut, like the cockerel that would crow,
Tries to his own self amorously o’er 1205
What never will be uttered else than so—
Since to the four walls, Forum and Mars’ Hill,
Speaks out the poesy which, penned, turns prose.
Clavecinist debarred his instrument,
He yet thrums—shirking neither turn nor trill, 1210
With desperate finger on dumb table-edge—
The sovereign rondo, shall conclude his *Suite*,
Charm an imaginary audience there,
From old Corelli to young Haendel, both
I’ the flesh at Rome, ere he perforce go print 1215
The cold black score, mere music for the mind—
The last speech against Guido and his gang,
With special end to prove Pompilia pure.
How the Fisc vindicates Pompilia’s fame.

Then comes the all but end, the ultimate 1220
Judgment save yours. Pope Innocent the Twelfth
Simple, sagacious, mild yet resolute,
With prudence, probity and—what beside
From the other world he feels impress at times,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK I

Having attained to fourscore years and six, — 1225
 How, when the court found Guido and the rest
 Guilty, but law supplied a subterfuge
 And passed the final sentence to the Pope,
 He, bringing his intelligence to bear
 This last time on what ball behoves him drop 1230
 In the urn, or white or black, does drop a black,
 Send five souls more to just precede his own,
 Stand him in stead and witness, if need were,
 How he is wont to do God's work on earth.
 The manner of his sitting out the dim 1235
 Droop of a sombre February day
 In the plain closet where he does such work,
 With, from all Peter's treasury, one stool,
 One table and one lathen crucifix.
 There sits the Pope, his thoughts for company ; 1240
 Grave but not sad,—nay, something like a cheer
 Leaves the lips free to be benevolent,
 Which, all day long, did duty firm and fast.
 A cherishing there is of foot and knee,
 A chafing loose-skinned large-veined hand with 1245
 hand,—
 What steward but knows when stewardship earns
 its wage,
 May levy praise, anticipate the lord ?
 He reads, notes, lays the papers down at last,
 Muses, then takes a turn about the room ;
 Unclasps a huge tome in an antique guise, 1250
 Primitive print and tongue half obsolete,
 That stands him in diurnal stead ; opes page,
 Finds place where falls the passage to be conned
 According to an order long in use :
 And, as he comes upon the evening's chance, 1255
 Starts somewhat, solemnizes straight his smile,
 Then reads aloud that portion first to last,
 And at the end lets flow his own thoughts forth

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Likewise aloud, for respite and relief,
Till by the dreary relics of the west

1260

Wan through the half-moon window, all his light,
He bows the head while the lips move in prayer,
Writes some three brief lines, signs and seals the
same,

Tinkles a hand-bell, bids the obsequious Sir
Who puts foot presently o' the closet-sill

1265

He watched outside of, bear as superscribed
That mandate to the Governor forthwith :

Then heaves abroad his cares in one good sigh,
Traverses corridor with no arm's help,

1270

And so to sup as a clear conscience should.

The manner of the judgment of the Pope.

Then must speak Guido yet a second time,
Satan's old saw being apt here—skin for skin,
All a man hath that will he give for life.

While life was graspable and gainable,

1275

And bird-like buzzed her wings round Guido's brow,
Not much truth stiffened out the web of words

He wove to catch her : when away she flew
And death came, death's breath rivelled up the lies,

1280

Left bare the metal thread, the fibre fine

Of truth, i' the spinning : the true words shone
last.

How Guido, to another purpose quite,

Speaks and despairs, the last night of his life,
In that New Prison by Castle Angelo

At the bridge-foot : the same man, another voice. 1285

On a stone bench in a close fetid cell,

Where the hot vapour of an agony,

Struck into drops on the cold wall, runs down—

Horrible worms made out of sweat and tears—

There crouch, well nigh to the knees in dungeon-
straw,

1290

Lit by the sole lamp suffered for their sake,
 Two awe-struck figures, this a Cardinal,
 That an Abate, both of old styled friends
 O' the thing part man part monster in the midst,
 So changed is Franceschini's gentle blood.

1295

The tiger-cat screams now, that whined before,
 That pried and tried and trod so gingerly,
 Till in its silkiness the trap-teeth joined ;
 Then you know how the bristling fury foams.

They listen, this wrapped in his folds of red,
 While his feet fumble for the filth below ;

1300

The other, as beseems a stouter heart,
 Working his best with beads and cross to ban
 The enemy that comes in like a flood
 Spite of the standard set up, verily

1305

And in no trope at all, against him there ;
 For at the prison-gate, just a few steps
 Outside, already, in the doubtful dawn,
 Thither, from this side and from that, slow sweep

1310

And settle down in silence solidly,
 Crow-wise, the frightful Brotherhood of Death.

Black-hatted and black-hooded huddle they,
 Black rosaries a-dangling from each waist ;

So take they their grim station at the door,
 Torches lit, skull-and-cross-bones-banner spread,

1315

And that gigantic Christ with open arms,
 Grounded. Nor lacks there aught but that the
 group

Break forth, intone the lamentable psalm,
 "Out of the deeps, Lord, have I cried to thee !"—

When inside, from the true profound, a sign
 Shall bear intelligence that the foe is foiled,

1320

Count Guido Franceschini has confessed,
 And is absolved and reconciled with God.

Then they, intoning, may begin their march,
 Make by the longest way for the People's Square,

1325

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

Carry the criminal to his crime's award :
A mob to cleave, a scaffolding to reach,
Two gallows and Mannaia crowning all.
How Guido made defence a second time.

Finally, even as thus by step and step 1330
I led you from the level of to-day
Up to the summit of so long ago,
Here, whence I point you the wide prospect
 round—

Let me, by like steps, slope you back to smooth,
Land you on mother-earth, no whit the worse, 1335
To feed o' the fat o' the furrow : free to dwell,
Taste our time's better things profusely spread
For all who love the level, corn and wine,
Much cattle and the many-folded fleece.

Shall not my friends go feast again on sward, 1340
Though cognizant of country in the clouds
Higher than wistful eagle's horny eye
Ever unclosed for, 'mid ancestral crags,
When morning broke and Spring was back once
 more,

And he died, heaven, save by his heart, unreached? 1345
Yet heaven my fancy lifts to, ladder-like,—
As Jack reached, holpen of his beanstalk-rungs !

A novel country : I might make it mine
By choosing which one aspect of the year
Suited mood best, and putting solely that 1350
On panel somewhere in the House of Fame,
Landscaping what I saved, not what I saw :
—Might fix you, whether frost in goblin-time
Startled the moon with his abrupt bright laugh,
Or, August's hair afloat in filmy fire, 1355
She fell, arms wide, face foremost on the world,
Swooned there and so singed out the strength of
 things.

Thus were abolished Spring and Autumn both,
 The land dwarfed to one likeness of the land,
 Life cramped corpse-fashion. Rather learn and
 love

1360

Each facet-flash of the revolving year!—
 Red, green and blue that whirl into a white,
 The variance now, the eventual unity,
 Which make the miracle. See it for yourselves,
 This man's act, changeable because alive!

1365

Action now shrouds, nor shows the informing
 thought;

Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top,
 Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,
 Shows one tint at a time to take the eye:
 Which, let a finger touch the silent sleep,
 Shifted a hair's-breadth shoots you dark for bright,
 Suffuses bright with dark, and baffles so
 Your sentence absolute for shine or shade.

1370

Once set such orbs,—white styled, black stigmatized,—

A-rolling, see them once on the other side
 Your good men and your bad men every one
 From Guido Franceschini to Guy Faux,
 Oft would you rub your eyes and change your
 names.

1375

Such, British Public, ye who like me not,
 (God love you!)—whom I yet have laboured for,
 Perchance more careful whoso runs may read
 Than erst when all, it seemed, could read who
 ran,—

1380

Perchance more careless whoso reads may praise
 Than late when he who praised and read and wrote
 Was apt to find himself the self-same me,—
 Such labour had such issue, so I wrought
 This arc, by furtherance of such alloy,

1385

BOOK I THE RING AND THE BOOK

And so, by one spirit, take away its trace
Till, justifiably golden, rounds my ring.

A ring without a posy, and that ring mine ?

1390

O lyric Love, half angel and half bird
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—
Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—
Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—
When the first summons from the darkling earth
Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their
blue,

1395

And bared them of the glory—to drop down,
To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—

1400

This is the same voice: can thy soul know change?
Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help !

Never may I commence my song, my due
To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
That still, despite the distance and the dark,
What was, again may be ; some interchange
Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
Some benediction anciently thy smile :

1405

—Never conclude, but raising hand and head
Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn
For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,
Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back
In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,
Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes
proud,

1410

Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall !

1415

II.—HALF-ROME

WHAT, you, Sir, come too? (Just the man I 'd
meet.)

Be ruled by me and have a care o' the crowd :
This way, while fresh folk go and get their gaze :
I 'll tell you like a book and save your shins.
Fie, what a roaring day we 've had! Whose fault? 5
Lorenzo in Lucina,—here 's a church
To hold a crowd at need, accommodate
All comers from the Corso ! If this crush
Make not its priests ashamed of what they show
For temple-room, don't prick them to draw purse 10
And down with bricks and mortar, eke us out
The beggarly transept with its bit of apse
Into a decent space for Christian ease,
Why, to-day's lucky pearl is cast to swine.
Listen and estimate the luck they 've had ! 15
(The right man, and I hold him.)

Sir, do you see,
They laid both bodies in the church, this morn
The first thing, on the chancel two steps up,
Behind the little marble balustrade ; 20
Disposed them, Pietro the old murdered fool
To the right of the altar, and his wretched wife
On the other side. In trying to count stabs,
People supposed Violante showed the most,
Till somebody explained us that mistake ; 25
His wounds had been dealt out indifferent where,
But she took all her stabbings in the face,
Since punished thus solely for honour's sake,

Honoris causâ, that 's the proper term.
 A delicacy there is, our gallants hold,
 When you avenge your honour and only then,
 That you disfigure the subject, fray the face,
 Not just take life and end, in clownish guise.
 It was Violante gave the first offence,
 Got therefore the conspicuous punishment :
 While Pietro, who helped merely, his mere death
 Answered the purpose, so his face went free.
 We fancied even, free as you please, that face
 Showed itself still intolerably wronged ;
 Was wrinkled over with resentment yet,
 Nor calm at all, as murdered faces use,
 Once the worst ended : an indignant air
 O' the head there was—'t is said the body turned
 Round and away, rolled from Violante's side
 Where they had laid it loving-husband-like.
 If so, if corpses can be sensitive,
 Why did not he roll right down altar-step,
 Roll on through nave, roll fairly out of church,
 Deprive Lorenzo of the spectacle,
 Pay back thus the succession of affronts
 Whereto this church had served as theatre ?
 For see : at that same altar where he lies,
 To that same inch of step, was brought the
 babe
 For blessing after baptism, and there styled
 Pompilia, and a string of names beside,
 By his bad wife, some seventeen years ago,
 Who purchased her simply to palm on him,
 Flatter his dotage and defraud the heirs.
 Wait awhile ! Also to this very step
 Did this Violante, twelve years afterward,
 Bring, the mock-mother, that child-cheat full-
 grown,
 Pompilia, in pursuance of her plot,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

And there brave God and man a second time
By linking a new victim to the lie.

There, having made a match unknown to him, 65

She, still unknown to Pietro, tied the knot

Which nothing cuts except this kind of knife ;

Yes, made her daughter, as the girl was held,

Marry a man, and honest man beside,

And man of birth to boot,—clandestinely

Because of this, because of that, because

O' the devil's will to work his worst for once,—

Confident she could top her part at need

And, when her husband must be told in turn,

Ply the wife's trade, play off the sex's trick

73

And, alternating worry with quiet qualms,

Bravado with submissiveness, prettily fool

Her Pietro into patience : so it proved.

Ay, 't is four years since man and wife they
grew,

This Guido Franceschini and this same

80

Pompilia, foolishly thought, falsely declared

A Comparini and the couple's child :

Just at this altar where, beneath the piece

Of Master Guido Reni, Christ on cross,

Second to nought observable in Rome,

85

That couple lie now, murdered yestereve.

Even the blind can see a providence here.

From dawn till now that it is growing dusk

A multitude has flocked and filled the church,

Coming and going, coming back again,

90

Till to count crazed one. Rome was at the show.

People climbed up the columns, fought for
spikes

O' the chapel-rail to perch themselves upon,

Jumped over and so broke the wooden work

Painted like porphyry to deceive the eye ;

95

Serve the priests right ! The organ-loft was
crammed,

Women were fainting, no few fights ensued,
In short, it was a show repaid your pains :
For, though their room was scant undoubtedly,
Yet they did manage matters, to be just, 100
A little at this Lorenzo. Body o' me !

I saw a body exposed once . . . never mind !
Enough that here the bodies had their due.
No stinginess in wax, a row all round,
And one big taper at each head and foot. 105

So, people pushed their way, and took their turn,
Saw, threw their eyes up, crossed themselves, gave
place

To pressure from behind, since all the world
Knew the old pair, could talk the tragedy
Over from first to last : Pompilia too, 110
Those who had known her—what 't was worth to
them !

Guido's acquaintance was in less request ;
The Count had lounged somewhat too long in
Rome,

Made himself cheap ; with him were hand and glove
Barbers and blear-eyed, as the ancient sings. 115

Also he is alive and like to be :
Had he considerately died,—aha !
I jostled Luca Cini on his staff,
Mute in the midst, the whole man one amaze,
Staring amain and crossing brow and breast. 120

“How now ?” asked I. “ ‘T is seventy years,”
quoth he,
“Since I first saw, holding my father's hand,
“Bodies set forth : a many have I seen,
“Yet all was poor to this I live and see.
“Here the world's wickedness seals up the sum : 125

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

“What with Molinos’ doctrine and this deed,
 “Antichrist surely comes and doomsday’s near.
 “May I depart in peace, I have seen my see.”
 “Depart then,” I advised, “nor block the road
 “For youngsters still behindhand with such
 sights !”

130

“Why no,” rejoins the venerable sire,
 “I know it’s horrid, hideous past belief,
 “Burdensome far beyond what eye can bear ;
 “But they do promise, when Pompilia dies
 “I’ the course o’ the day,—and she can’t outlive
 night,—

135

“They’ll bring her body also to expose
 “Beside the parents, one, two, three a-breast ;
 “That were indeed a sight, which might I see,
 “I trust I should not last to see the like !”
 Whereat I bade the senior spare his shanks,
 Since doctors give her till to-night to live,
 And tell us how the butchery happened. “Ah,
 “But you can’t know !” sighs he, “I’ll not
 despair :

140

“Beside I’m useful at explaining things—
 “As, how the dagger laid there at the feet,
 “Caused the peculiar cuts ; I mind its make,
 “Triangular i’ the blade, a Genoese,
 “Armed with those little hook-teeth on the edge
 “To open in the flesh nor shut again :
 “I like to teach a novice : I shall stay !”
 And stay he did, and stay be sure he will.

145

150

A personage came by the private door
 At noon to have his look : I name no names :
 Well then, His Eminence the Cardinal,
 Whose servitor in honourable sort
 Guido was once, the same who made the match,
 (Will you have the truth ?) whereof we see effect.

155

No sooner whisper ran he was arrived
 Than up pops Curate Carlo, a brisk lad,
 Who never lets a good occasion slip,
 And volunteers improving the event.

We looked he 'd give the history's self some help,
 Treat us to how the wife's confession went
 (This morning she confessed her crime, we know)
 And, may-be, throw in something of the Priest— 165
 If he 's not ordered back, punished anew,
 The gallant, Caponsacchi, Lucifer

I' the garden where Pompilia, Eve-like, lured
 Her Adam Guido to his fault and fall.

Think you we got a sprig of speech akin 170
 To this from Carlo, with the Cardinal there ?
 Too wary he was, too widely awake, I trow.

He did the murder in a dozen words ;
 Then said that all such outrages crop forth
 I' the course of nature when Molinos' tares 175

Are sown for wheat, flourish and choke the Church :
 So slid on to the abominable sect

And the philosophic sin—we 've heard all that,
 And the Cardinal too, (who book-made on the same)

But, for the murder, left it where he found. 180

Oh but he 's quick, the Curate, minds his game !

And, after all, we have the main o' the fact :

Case could not well be simpler,—mapped, as it
 were,

We follow the murder's maze from source to sea,
 By the red line, past mistake : one sees indeed 185

Not only how all was and must have been,
 But cannot other than be to the end of time.

Turn out here by the Ruspoli ! Do you hold
 Guido was so prodigiously to blame ?

A certain cousin of yours has told you so ? 190

Exactly ! Here 's a friend shall set you right,
 Let him but have the handsel of your ear.

These wretched Comparini were once gay
 And galliard, of the modest middle class :
 Born in this quarter seventy years ago 195
 And married young, they lived the accustomed life,
 Citizens as they were of good repute :
 And, childless, naturally took their ease
 With only their two selves to care about
 And use the wealth for : wealthy is the word, 200
 Since Pietro was possessed of house and land—
 And specially one house, when good days smiled,
 In Via Vittoria, the aspectable street
 Where he lived mainly ; but another house
 Of less pretension did he buy betimes, 205
 The villa, meant for jaunts and jollity,
 I' the Pauline district, to be private there—
 Just what puts murder in an enemy's head.
 Moreover,—here 's the worm i' the core, the germ
 O' the rottenness and ruin which arrived,— 210
 He owned some usufruct, had moneys' use
 Lifelong, but to determine with his life
 In heirs' default : so, Pietro craved an heir,
 (The story always old and always new)
 Shut his fool's-eyes fast on the visible good 215
 And wealth for certain, opened them owl-wide
 On fortune's sole piece of forgetfulness,
 The child that should have been and would not be.

Hence, seventeen years ago, conceive his glee
 When first Violante, 'twixt a smile and blush, 220
 With touch of agitation proper too,
 Announced that, spite of her unpromising age,
 The miracle would in time be manifest,
 An heir's birth was to happen : and it did.
 Somehow or other,—how, all in good time ! 225
 By a trick, a sleight of hand you are to hear,—
 A child was born, Pompilia, for his joy,

Plaything at once and prop, a fairy-gift,
 A saints' grace or, say, grant of the good God,—
 A fiddle-pin's end ! What imbeciles are we ! 230
 Look now : if some one could have prophesied,
 " For love of you, for liking to your wife,
 " I undertake to crush a snake I spy
 " Settling itself i' the soft of both your breasts.
 " Give me yon babe to strangle painlessly ! 235
 " She 'll soar to the safe : you 'll have your crying
 out,
 " Then sleep, then wake, then sleep, then end
 your days
 " In peace and plenty, mixed with mild regret,
 " Thirty years hence when Christmas takes old
 folk"—
 How had old Pietro sprung up, crossed himself, 240
 And kicked the conjuror ! Whereas you and I,
 Being wise with after-wit, had clapped our hands ;
 Nay, added, in the old fool's interest,
 " Strangle the black-eyed babe, so far so good,
 " But on condition you relieve the man 245
 " O' the wife and throttle him Violante too—
 " She is the mischief ! "

We had hit the mark.

She, whose trick brought the babe into the world,
 She it was, when the babe was grown a girl, 250
 Judged a new trick should reinforce the old,
 Send vigour to the lie now somewhat spent
 By twelve years' service ; lest Eve's rule decline
 Over this Adam of hers, whose cabbage-plot
 Throve dubiously since turned fools'-paradise, 255
 Spite of a nightingale on every stump.
 Pietro's estate was dwindling day by day,
 While he, rapt far above such mundane care,
 Crawled all-fours with his baby pick-a-back,

Sat at serene cats'-cradle with his child, 260
 Or took the measured tallness, top to toe,
 Of what was grown a great girl twelve years old :
 Till sudden at the door a tap discreet,
 A visitor's premonitory cough,
 And poverty had reached him in her rounds. 265

This came when he was past the working-time,
 Had learned to dandle and forgot to dig,
 And who must but Violante cast about,
 Contrive and task that head of hers again ?
 She who had caught one fish, could make that
 catch 270

A bigger still, in angler's policy :
 So, with an angler's mercy for the bait,
 Her minnow was set wriggling on its barb
 And tossed to mid-stream ; which means, this
 grown girl

With the great eyes and bounty of black hair 275
 And first crisp youth that tempts a jaded taste,
 Was whisked i' the way of a certain man, who
 snapped.

Count Guido Franceschini the Aretine
 Was head of an old noble house enough,
 Not over-rich, you can't have everything,
 But such a man as riches rub against,
 Readily stick to,—one with a right to them
 Born in the blood : 't was in his very brow
 Always to knit itself against the world,
 Beforehand so, when that world stinted due
 Service and suit : the world ducks and defers. 280
 As such folks do, he had come up to Rome
 To better his fortune, and, since many years,
 Was friend and follower of a cardinal ;
 Waiting the rather thus on providence 285
 290

That a shrewd younger poorer brother yet,
 The Abate Paolo, a regular priest,
 Had long since tried his powers and found he swam
 With the deftest on the Galilean pool :
 But then he was a web-foot, free o' the wave, 295
 And no ambiguous dab-chick hatched to strut,
 Humbled by any fond attempt to swim
 When fiercer fowl usurped his dunghill top—
 A whole priest, Paolo, no mere piece of one
 Like Guido tacked thus to the Church's tail ! 300
 Guido moreover, as the head o' the house,
 Claiming the main prize, not the lesser luck,
 The centre lily, no mere chickweed fringe.

He waited and learned waiting, thirty years ;
 Got promise, missed performance—what would
 you have ? 305

No petty post rewards a nobleman
 For spending youth in splendid lackey-work,
 And there 's concurrence for each rarer prize ;
 When that falls, rougher hand and readier foot
 Push aside Guido spite of his black looks. 310

The end was, Guido, when the warning showed,
 The first white hair i' the glass, gave up the game,
 Determined on returning to his town,
 Making the best of bad incurable,
 Patching the old palace up and lingering there 315
 The customary life out with his kin,
 Where honour helps to spice the scanty bread.

Just as he trimmed his lamp and girt his loins
 To go his journey and be wise at home,
 In the right mood of disappointed worth,
 Who but Violante sudden spied her prey
 (Where was I with that angler-simile ?) 320

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

And threw her bait, Pompilia, where he sulked—
A gleam i' the gloom !

What if he gained thus much, 325

Wrung out this sweet drop from the bitter Past,
Bore off this rose-bud from the prickly brake
To justify such torn clothes and scratched hands,
And, after all, brought something back from
Rome ?

Would not a wife serve at Arezzo well

330

To light the dark house, lend a look of youth
To the mother's face grown meagre, left alone
And famished with the emptiness of hope,

Old Donna Beatrice ? Wife you want

Would you play family-representative,

335

Carry you elder-brotherly, high and right
O'er what may prove the natural petulance
Of the third brother, younger, greedier still,
Girolamo, also a fledgeling priest,

Beginning life in turn with callow beak

340

Agape for luck, no luck had stopped and stilled.

Such were the pinks and greys about the bait

Persuaded Guido gulp down hook and all.

What constituted him so choice a catch,

You question ? Past his prime and poor beside ! 345

Ask that of any she who knows the trade.

Why first, here was a nobleman with friends,

A palace one might run to and be safe

When presently the threatened fate should fall,

A big-browed master to block door-way up,

350

Parley with people bent on pushing by

And praying the mild Pietro quick clear scores :

Is birth a privilege and power or no ?

Also,—but judge of the result desired,

By the price paid and manner of the sale.

355

The Count was made woo, win and wed at once :

Asked, and was haled for answer, lest the heat
 Should cool, to San Lorenzo, one blind eve,
 And had Pompilia put into his arms
 O' the sly there, by a hasty candle-blink,
 With sanction of some priest-confederate
 Properly paid to make short work and sure. 360

So did old Pietro's daughter change her style
 For Guido Franceschini's lady-wife
 Ere Guido knew it well ; and why this haste 365
 And scramble and indecent secrecy ?
 "Lest Pietro, all the while in ignorance,
 "Should get to learn, gainsay and break the
 match :
 "His peevishness had promptly put aside
 "Such honour and refused the proffered boon, 370
 "Pleased to become authoritative once.
 "She remedied the wilful man's mistake—"
 Did our discreet Violante. Rather say,
 Thus did she, lest the object of her game,
 Guido the gulled one, give him but a chance, 375
 A moment's respite, time for thinking twice,
 Might count the cost before he sold himself,
 And try the clink of coin they paid him with.

But coin paid, bargain struck and business done,
 Once the clandestine marriage over thus, 380
 All parties made perforce the best o' the fact ;
 Pietro could play vast indignation off,
 Be ignorant and astounded, dupe, poor soul,
 Please you, of daughter, wife and son-in-law,
 While Guido found himself in flagrant fault, 385
 Must e'en do suit and service, soothe, subdue
 A father not unreasonably chafed,
 Bring him to terms by paying son's devoir.
 Pleasant initiation !

The end, this :

390

Guido's broad back was saddled to bear all—
 Pietro, Violante, and Pompilia too,—
 Three lots cast confidently in one lap,
 Three dead-weights with one arm to lift the three
 Out of their limbo up to life again.

395

The Roman household was to strike fresh root
 In a new soil, graced with a novel name,
 Gilt with an alien glory, Arette

Henceforth and never Roman any more,
 By treaty and engagement ; thus it ran :
 Pompilia's dowry for Pompilia's self

400

As a thing of course,—she paid her own expense ;
 No loss nor gain there : but the couple, you see,
 They, for their part, turned over first of all
 Their fortune in its rags and rottenness

405

To Guido, fusion and confusion, he
 And his with them and theirs,—whatever rag
 With coin residuary fell on floor

When Brother Paolo's energetic shake

Should do the relics justice : since 't was thought, 410

Once vulnerable Pietro out of reach,

That, left at Rome as representative,

The Abate, backed by a potent patron here,

And otherwise with purple flushing him,

Might play a good game with the creditor,

415

Make up a moiety which, great or small,

Should go to the common stock—if anything,

Guido's, so far repayment of the cost

About to be,—and if, as looked more like,

Nothing,—why, all the nobler cost were his

420

Who guaranteed, for better or for worse,

To Pietro and Violante, house and home,

Kith and kin, with the pick of company

And life o' the fat o' the land while life should last.

How say you to the bargain at first blush ?

425

Why did a middle-aged not-silly man
 Show himself thus besotted all at once ?
 Quoth Solomon, one black eye does it all.

They went to Arezzo,—Pietro and his spouse,
 With just the dusk o' the day of life to spend,
 Eager to use the twilight, taste a treat,
 Enjoy for once with neither stay nor stint
 The luxury of lord-and-lady-ship,

430

And realize the stuff and nonsense long
 A-simmer in their noddles ; vent the fume
 Born there and bred, the citizen's conceit
 How fares nobility while crossing earth,
 What rampart or invisible body-guard
 Keeps off the taint of common life from such.

435

They had not fed for nothing on the tales
 Of grandees who give banquets worthy Jove,
 Spending gold as if Plutus paid a whim,
 Served with obeisances as when . . . what God ?
 I 'm at the end of my tether ; 't is enough

440

You understand what they came primed to see :
 While Guido who should minister the sight,
 Stay all this qualmish greediness of soul
 With apples and with flagons—for his part,
 Was set on life diverse as pole from pole :

445

Lust of the flesh, lust of the eye,—what else
 Was he just now awake from, sick and sage,
 After the very debauch they would begin ?—
 Suppose such stuff and nonsense really were.
 That bubble, they were bent on blowing big,
 He had blown already till he burst his cheeks,
 And hence found soapsuds bitter to the tongue.
 He hoped now to walk softly all his days
 In soberness of spirit, if haply so,
 Pinching and paring he might furnish forth
 A frugal board, bare sustenance, no more,

450

455

460

Till times, that could not well grow worse, should mend.

Thus minded then, two parties mean to meet
And make each other happy. The first week,
And fancy strikes fact and explodes in full.

“This,” shrieked the Comparini, “this the Count, 465

“The palace, the signorial privilege,

“The pomp and pageantry were promised us?

“For this have we exchanged our liberty,

“Our competence, our darling of a child?

“To house as spectres in a sepulchre

“Under this black stone-heap, the street’s dis-
grace, 470

“Grimmest as that is of the gruesome town,

“And here pick garbage on a pewter plate

“Or cough at verjuice dripped from earthenware?

“Oh Via Vittoria, oh the other place

“I’ the Pauline, did we give you up for this? 475

“Where’s the foregone housekeeping good and
gay,

“The neighbourliness, the companionship,

“The treat and feast when holidays came round,

“The daily feast that seemed no treat at all,

“Called common by the uncommon fools we were! 480

“Even the sun that used to shine at Rome,

“Where is it? Robbed and starved and frozen too,

“We will have justice, justice if there be!”

Did not they shout, did not the town resound! 485

Guido’s old lady-mother Beatrice,

Who since her husband, Count Tommaso’s death,

Had held sole sway i’ the house,—the doited crone

Slow to acknowledge, curtsey and abdicate,—

Was recognized of true novveral type,

Dragon and devil. His brother Girolamo

Came next in order: priest was he? The worse! 490

No way of winning him to leave his mumps
 And help the laugh against old ancestry
 And formal habits long since out of date,
 Letting his youth be patterned on the mode
 Approved of where Violante laid down law.
 Or did he brighten up by way of change,
 Dispose himself for affability?

495

The malapert, too complaisant by half
 To the alarmed young novice of a bride !
 Let him go buzz, betake himself elsewhere
 Nor singe his fly-wings in the candle-flame !

500

Four months' probation of this purgatory,
 Dog-snap and cat-claw, curse and counterblast,
 The devil's self were sick of his own din ;
 And Pietro, after trumpeting huge wrongs
 At church and market-place, pillar and post,
 Square's corner, street's end, now the palace-step
 And now the wine-house bench—while, on her side, 510
 Violante up and down was voluble
 In whatsoever pair of ears would perk
 From goody, gossip, cater-cousin and sib,
 Curious to peep at the inside of things
 And catch in the act pretentious poverty
 At its wits' end to keep appearance up,
 Make both ends meet,—nothing the vulgar loves
 Like what this couple pitched them right and left.
 Then, their worst done that way, both struck tent,
 marched :

515

—Renounced their share o' the bargain, flung what
 dues

520

Guido was bound to pay, in Guido's face,
 Left their hearts'-darling, treasure of the twain
 And so forth, the poor inexperienced bride,
 To her own devices, bade Arezzo rot,
 Cursed life signorial, and sought Rome once more. 525

I see the comment ready on your lip,
 "The better fortune, Guido's—free at least
 "By this defection of the foolish pair,
 "He could begin make profit in some sort
 "Of the young bride and the new quietness, 530
 "Lead his own life now, henceforth breathe un-
 plagued."

Could he? You know the sex like Guido's self.
 Learn the Violante-nature!

Once in Rome,
 By way of helping Guido lead such life, 535
 Her first act to inaugurate return

Was, she got pricked in conscience: Jubilee
 Gave her the hint. Our Pope, as kind as just,
 Attained his eighty years, announced a boon
 Should make us bless the fact, held Jubilee—
 Short shrift, prompt pardon for the light offence,
 And no rough dealing with the regular crime
 So this occasion were not suffered slip—

Otherwise, sins commuted as before,
 Without the least abatement in the price. 545

Now, who had thought it? All this while, it seems,
 Our sage Violante had a sin of a sort

She must compound for now or not at all.

Now be the ready riddance! She confessed

Pompilia was a fable not a fact: 550
 She never bore a child in her whole life.

Had this child been a changeling, that were grace

In some degree, exchange is hardly theft,

You take your stand on truth ere leap your lie:

Here was all lie, no touch of truth at all,

All the lie hers—not even Pietro guessed

He was as childless still as twelve years since.

The babe had been a find i' the filth-heap, Sir,

Catch from the kennel! There was found at Rome,

Down in the deepest of our social dregs,
 A woman who professed the wanton's trade
 Under the requisite thin *coverture*,
Communis meretrix and washer-wife :

560

The creature thus conditioned found by chance
 Motherhood like a jewel in the muck,
 And straightway either trafficked with her prize
 Or listened to the tempter and let be,—
 Made pact abolishing her place and part
 In womankind, beast-fellowship indeed.

565

She sold this babe eight months before its birth
 To our Violante, Pietro's honest spouse,
 Well-famed and widely-instanced as that crown
 To the husband, virtue in a woman's shape.

570

She it was, bought, paid for, passed off the thing
 As very flesh and blood and child of her
 Despite the flagrant fifty years,—and why ?

575

Partly to please old Pietro, fill his cup
 With wine at the late hour when lees are left,
 And send him from life's feast rejoicingly,—
 Partly to cheat the rightful heirs, agape,
 Each uncle's cousin's brother's son of him,
 For that same principal of the *usufruct*
 It vexed him he must die and leave behind.

580

Such was the sin had come to be confessed.

Which of the tales, the first or last, was true ?

585

Did she so sin once, or, confessing now,
 Sin for the first time ? Either way you will.

One sees a reason for the cheat : one sees
 A reason for a cheat in owning cheat

Where no cheat had been. What of the revenge ?

590

What prompted the contrition all at once,
 Made the avowal easy, the shame slight ?

Why, prove they but Pompilia not their child,
 No child, no dowry ! this, supposed their child,

Had claimed what this, shown alien to their blood, 595
 Claimed nowise : Guido's claim was through his
 wife,

Null then and void with hers. The biter bit,
 Do you see ! For such repayment of the past,
 One might conceive the penitential pair
 Ready to bring their case before the courts, 600
 Publish their infamy to all the world
 And, arm in arm, go chuckling thence content.

Is this your view ? 'T was Guido's anyhow
 And colourable : he came forward then,

Protested in his very bride's behalf 605
 Against this lie and all it led to, least
 Of all the loss o' the dowry ; no ! From her
 And him alike he would expunge the blot,
 Erase the brand of such a bestial birth,

Participate in no hideous heritage 610
 Gathered from the gutter to be garnered up
 And glorified in a palace. Peter and Paul !
 But that who likes may look upon the pair
 Exposed in yonder church, and show his skill
 By saying which is eye and which is mouth 615
 Thro' those stabs thick and threefold,—but for
 that—

A strong word on the liars and their lie
 Might crave expression and obtain it, Sir !
 —Though prematurely, since there's more to come,
 More that will shake your confidence in things 620
 Your cousin tells you,—may I be so bold ?

This makes the first act of the farce,—anon
 The sombre element comes stealing in
 Till all is black or blood-red in the piece.
 Guido, thus made a laughing-stock abroad,
 A proverb for the market-place at home, 625
 Left alone with Pompilia now, this graft

So reputable on his ancient stock,
 This plague-seed set to fester his sound flesh,
 What does the Count? Revenge him on his wife? 630
 Unfasten at all risks to rid himself
 The noisome lazarus-badge, fall foul of fate,
 And, careless whether the poor rag was 'ware
 O' the part it played, or helped unwittingly,
 Bid it go burn and leave his frayed flesh free? 635
 Plainly, did Guido open both doors wide,
 Spurn thence the cur-cast creature and clear scores
 As man might, tempted in extreme like this?
 No, birth and breeding, and compassion too
 Saved her such scandal. She was young, he thought, 640
 Not privy to the treason, punished most
 I' the proclamation of it; why make her
 A party to the crime she suffered by?
 Then the black eyes were now her very own,
 Not any more Violante's: let her live, 645
 Lose in a new air, under a new sun,
 The taint of the imputed parentage
 Truly or falsely, take no more the touch
 Of Pietro and his partner anyhow!
 All might go well yet. 650

So she thought, herself,
 It seems, since what was her first act and deed
 When news came how these kindly ones at Rome
 Had stripped her naked to amuse the world
 With spots here, spots there and spots everywhere? 655
 —For I should tell you that they noised abroad
 Not merely the main scandal of her birth,
 But slanders written, printed, published wide,
 Pamphlets which set forth all the pleasantry
 Of how the promised glory was a dream, 660
 The power a bubble, and the wealth—why, dust.
 There was a picture, painted to the life,

Of those rare doings, that superlative
 Initiation in magnificence
 Conferred on a poor Roman family 665
 By favour of Arezzo and her first
 And famousest, the Franceschini there.
 You had the Countship holding head aloft
 Bravely although bespattered, shifts and straits
 In keeping out o' the way o' the wheels o' the world, 670
 The comic of those home-contrivances
 When the old lady-mother's wit was taxed
 To find six clamorous mouths in food more real
 Than fruit plucked off the cobwebbed family-tree,
 Or acorns shed from its gilt mouldered frame— 675
 Cold glories served up with stale fame for sauce.
 What, I ask,—when the drunkenness of hate
 Hiccuped return for hospitality,
 Befouled the table they had feasted on,
 Or say,—God knows I 'll not prejudge the case,— 680
 Grievances thus distorted, magnified,
 Coloured by quarrel into calumny,—
 What side did our Pompilia first espouse ?
 Her first deliberate measure was—she wrote,
 Pricked by some loyal impulse, straight to Rome 685
 And her husband's brother the Abate there,
 Who, having managed to effect the match,
 Might take men's censure for its ill success.
 She made a clean breast also in her turn,
 And qualified the couple properly, 690
 Since whose departure, hell, she said, was heaven,
 And the house, late distracted by their peals,
 Quiet as Carmel where the lilies live.
 Herself had oftentimes complained : but why ?
 All her complaints had been their prompting, tales 695
 Trumped up, devices to this very end.
 Their game had been to thwart her husband's love
 And cross his will, malign his words and ways,

To reach this issue, furnish this pretence
 For impudent withdrawal from their bond,— 700
 Theft, indeed murder, since they meant no less
 Whose last injunction to her simple self
 Had been—what parents'-precept do you think?
 That she should follow after with all speed,
 Fly from her husband's house clandestinely, 705
 Join them at Rome again, but first of all
 Pick up a fresh companion in her flight,
 So putting youth and beauty to fit use,—
 Some gay dare-devil cloak-and-rapier spark
 Capable of adventure,—helped by whom 710
 She, some fine eve when lutes were in the air,
 Having put poison in the posset-cup,
 Laid hands on money, jewels and the like,
 And, to conceal the thing with more effect,
 By way of parting benediction too, 715
 Fired the house,—one would finish famously
 I' the tumult, slip out, scurry off and away
 And turn up merrily at home once more.
 Fact this, and not a dream o' the devil, Sir!
 And more than this, a fact none dare dispute, 720
 Word for word, such a letter did she write,
 And such the Abate read, nor simply read
 But gave all Rome to ruminate upon,
 In answer to such charges as, I say,
 The couple sought to be beforehand with. 725

The cause thus carried to the courts at Rome,
 Guido away, the Abate had no choice
 But stand forth, take his absent brother's part,
 Defend the honour of himself beside.
 He made what head he might against the pair, 730
 Maintained Pompilia's birth legitimate
 And all her rights intact—hers, Guido's now:
 And so far by his policy turned their flank,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

(The enemy being beforehand in the place)

That,—though the courts allowed the cheat for fact, 735
 Suffered Violante to parade her shame,
 Publish her infamy to heart's content,
 And let the tale o' the feigned birth pass for
 proved,—

Yet they stopped there, refused to intervene
 And dispossess the innocents, befooled

740

By gifts o' the guilty, at guilt's new caprice.

They would not take away the dowry now

Wrongfully given at first, nor bar at all

Succession to the aforesaid usufruct,

Established on a fraud, nor play the game

745

Of Pietro's child and now not Pietro's child

As it might suit the gamester's purpose. Thus

Was justice ever ridiculed in Rome :

Such be the double verdicts favoured here

Which send away both parties to a suit

750

Nor puffed up nor cast down,—for each a crumb
 Of right, for neither of them the whole loaf.

Whence, on the Comparini's part, appeal—

Counter-appeal on Guido's,—that's the game :

And so the matter stands, even to this hour,

755

Bandied as balls are in a tennis-court,

And so might stand, unless some heart broke first,

Till doomsday.

Leave it thus, and now revert
 To the old Arezzo whence we moved to Rome.

760

We've had enough o' the parents, false or true,
 Now for a touch o' the daughter's quality.

The start's fair henceforth, every obstacle

Out of the young wife's footpath, she's alone,

Left to walk warily now : how does she walk ?

765

Why, once a dwelling's threshold marked and
 crossed

In rubric by the enemy on his rounds
 As eligible, as fit place of prey,
 Baffle him henceforth, keep him out who can !
 Stop up the door at the first hint of hoof,
 Presently at the window taps a horn,
 And Satan 's by your fireside, never fear !
 Pompilia, left alone now, found herself ;
 Found herself young too, sprightly, fair enough,
 Matched with a husband old beyond his age
 (Though that was something like four times her
 own) 775

Because of cares past, present and to come :
 Found too the house dull and its inmates dead,
 So, looked outside for light and life.

And love 780

Did in a trice turn up with life and light,—
 The man with the aureole, sympathy made flesh,
 The all-consoling Caponsacchi, Sir !
 A priest—what else should the consoler be ?
 With goodly shoulderblade and proper leg,
 A portly make and a symmetric shape,
 And curls that clustered to the tonsure quite.
 This was a bishop in the bud, and now
 A canon full-blown so far : priest, and priest
 Nowise exorbitantly overworked,
 The courtly Christian, not so much Saint Paul
 As a saint of Cæsar's household : there posed he
 Sending his god-glance after his shot shaft,
 Apollos turned Apollo, while the snake
 Pompilia writhed transfixed through all her spires. 795
 He, not a visitor at Guido's house,
 Scarce an acquaintance, but in prime request
 With the magnates of Arezzo, was seen here,
 Heard there, felt everywhere in Guido's path
 If Guido's wife's path be her husband's too.
 Now he threw comfits at the theatre 800

Into her lap,—what harm in Carnival?
 Now he pressed close till his foot touched her
 gown,
 His hand brushed hers,—how help on promenade?
 And, ever on weighty business, found his steps 805
 Incline to a certain haunt of doubtful fame
 Which fronted Guido's palace by mere chance ;
 While—how do accidents sometimes combine !—
 Pompilia chose to cloister up her charms
 Just in a chamber that o'erlooked the street, 810
 Sat there to pray, or peep thence at mankind.

This passage of arms and wits amused the town.
 At last the husband lifted eyebrow,—bent
 On day-book and the study how to wring
 Half the due vintage from the worn-out vines 815
 At the villa, tease a quarter the old rent
 From the farmstead, tenants swore would tumble
 soon,—

Pricked up his ear a-singing day and night
 With “ruin, ruin” ;—and so surprised at last—
 Why, what else but a titter? Up he jumps. 820
 Back to mind comethose scratchings at the grange,
 Prints of the paw about the outhouse ; rife
 In his head at once again are word and wink,
Mum here and *budget* there, the smell o' the fox,
 The musk o' the gallant. “Friends, there's
 falseness here!” 825

The proper help of friends in such a strait
 Is waggery, the world over. Laugh him free
 O' the regular jealous-fit that 's incident
 To all old husbands that wed brisk young wives,
 And he 'll go duly docile all his days. 830
 “Somebody courts your wife, Count? Where
 and when?

“ How and why? Mere horn-madness: have a care !

“ Your lady loves her own room, sticks to it,

“ Locks herself in for hours, you say yourself.

“ And—what, it’s Caponsacchi means you harm? 835

“ The Canon? We caress him, he’s the world’s,

“ A man of such acceptance—never dream,

“ Though he were fifty times the fox you fear,

“ He’d risk his brush for your particular chick,

“ When the wide town’s his hen-roost! Fie o’ the fool !” 840

So they dispensed their comfort of a kind.

Guido at last cried “ Something is in the air,

“ Under the earth, some plot against my peace.

“ The trouble of eclipse hangs overhead;

“ How it should come of that officious orb 845

“ Your Canon in my system, you must say:

“ I say—that from the pressure of this spring

“ Began the chime and interchange of bells,

“ Ever one whisper, and one whisper more,

“ And just one whisper for the silvery last, 850

“ Till all at once a-row the bronze-throats burst

“ Into a larum both significant

“ And sinister: stop it I must and will.

“ Let Caponsacchi take his hand away

“ From the wire!—disport himself in other paths 855

“ Than lead precisely to my palace-gate,—

“ Look where he likes except one window’s way

“ Where, cheek on hand, and elbow set on sill,

“ Happens to lean and say her litanies

“ Every day and all day long, just my wife— 860

“ Or wife and Caponsacchi may fare the worse!”

Admire the man’s simplicity, “ I ’ll do this,

“ I ’ll not have that, I ’ll punish and prevent! ”—

’T is easy saying. But to a fray, you see,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

Two parties go. The badger shows his teeth : 865
 The fox nor lies down sheep-like nor dares fight.
 Oh, the wife knew the appropriate warfare well,
 The way to put suspicion to the blush !
 At first hint of remonstrance, up and out
 I' the face of the world, you found her : she could
 speak,

State her case,—Franceschini was a name,
 Guido had his full share of foes and friends—
 Why should not she call these to arbitrate ?
 She bade the Governor do governance,
 Cried out on the Archbishop,—why, there now, 875
 Take him for sample ! Three successive times,
 Had he to reconduct her by main-force
 From where she took her station opposite
 His shut door,—on the public steps thereto,
 Wringing her hands, when he came out to see, 880
 And shrieking all her wrongs forth at his foot,—
 Back to the husband and the house she fled :
 Judge if that husband warmed him in the face
 Of friends or frowned on foes as heretofore !
 Judge if he missed the natural grin of folk, 885
 Or lacked the customary compliment
 Of cap and bells, the luckless husband's fit !

So it went on and on till—who was right ?
 One merry April morning, Guido woke
 After the cuckoo, so late, near noonday,
 With an inordinate yawning of the jaws, 890
 Ears plugged, eyes gummed together, palate,
 tongue
 And teeth one mud-paste made of poppy-milk ;
 And found his wife flown, his scritoire the worse
 For a rummage,—jewelry that was, was not,
 Some money there had made itself wings too,—
 The door lay wide and yet the servants slept

Sound as the dead, or dosed which does as well.
 In short, Pompilia, she who, candid soul,
 Had not so much as spoken all her life 900

To the Canon, nay, so much as peeped at him
 Between her fingers while she prayed in church,—
 This lamb-like innocent of fifteen years
 (Such she was grown to by this time of day)
 Had simply put an opiate in the drink 905

Of the whole household overnight, and then
 Got up and gone about her work secure,
 Laid hand on this waif and the other stray,
 Spoiled the Philistine and marched out of doors
 In company of the Canon who, Lord's love, 910

What with his daily duty at the church,
 Nightly devoir where ladies congregate,
 Had something else to mind, assure yourself,
 Beside Pompilia, paragon though she be,
 Or notice if her nose were sharp or blunt ! 915

Well, anyhow, albeit impossible,
 Both of them were together jollily
 Jaunting it Rome-ward, half-way there by this,
 While Guido was left go and get undrugged,
 Gather his wits up, groaningly give thanks 920

When neighbours crowded round him to condole.
 "Ah," quoth a gossip, "well I mind me now,
 "The Count did always say he thought he felt
 "He feared as if this very chance might fall !
 "And when a man of fifty finds his corns 925

"Ache and his joints throb, and foresees a storm,
 "Though neighbours laugh and say the sky is clear,
 "Let us henceforth believe him weatherwise !"
 Then was the story told, I 'll cut you short :
 All neighbours knew : no mystery in the world. 930

The lovers left at nightfall—over night
 Had Caponsacchi come to carry off
 Pompilia,—not alone, a friend of his,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

One Guillichini, the more conversant
 With Guido's housekeeping that he was just 935
 A cousin of Guido's and might play a prank—
 (Have not you too a cousin that 's a wag ?)
 —Lord and a Canon also,—what would you have?
 Such are the red-clothed milk-swollen poppy-heads
 That stand and stiffen 'mid the wheat o' the
 Church !— 940

This worthy came to aid, abet his best.
 And so the house was ransacked, booty bagged,
 The lady led downstairs and out of doors
 Guided and guarded till, the city passed,
 A carriage lay convenient at the gate. 945
 Good-bye to the friendly Canon ; the loving one
 Could peradventure do the rest himself.
 In jumps Pompilia, after her the priest,
 "Whip, driver ! Money makes the mare to go,
 "And we 've a bagful. Take the Roman road !" 950
 So said the neighbours. This was eightourssince.

Guido heard all, swore the befitting oaths,
 Shook off the relics of his poison-drench,
 Got horse, was fairly started in pursuit
 With never a friend to follow, found the track 955
 Fast enough, 't was the straight Perugia way,
 Trod soon upon their very heels, too late
 By a minute only at Camoscia, reached
 Chiusi, Foligno, ever the fugitives
 Just ahead, just out as he galloped in, 960
 Getting the good news ever fresh and fresh,
 Till, lo, at the last stage of all, last post
 Before Rome,—as we say, in sight of Rome
 And safety (there 's impunity at Rome
 For priests, you know) at—what 's the little
 place ?— 965
 What some call Castelnuovo, some just call

The Osteria, because o' the post-house inn,
 There, at the journey's all but end, it seems,
 Triumph deceived them and undid them both,
 Secure they might foretaste felicity

970

Nor fear surprisal : so, they were surprised.
 There did they halt at early evening, there
 Did Guido overtake them : 't was day-break ;
 He came in time enough, not time too much,
 Since in the courtyard stood the Canon's self

975

Urging the drowsy stable-grooms to haste
 Harness the horses, have the journey end,
 The trifling four-hours'-running, so reach Rome.
 And the other runaway, the wife ? Upstairs,
 Still on the couch where she had spent the night,

980

One couch in one room, and one room for both.
 So gained they six hours, so were lost thereby.

Sir, what 's the sequel ? Lover and beloved
 Fall on their knees ? No impudence serves here ?
 They beat their breasts and beg for easy death,
 Confess this, that and the other ?—anyhow

985

Confess there wanted not some likelihood
 To the supposition so preposterous,
 That, O Pompilia, thy sequestered eyes
 Had noticed, straying o'er the prayerbook's edge,

990

More of the Canon than that black his coat,
 Buckled his shoes were, broad his hat of brim :

And that, O Canon, thy religious care
 Had breathed too soft a *benedicite*

995

To banish trouble from a lady's breast
 So lonely and so lovely, nor so lean !

This you expect ? Indeed, then, much you err.
 Not to such ordinary end as this

Had Caponsacchi flung the cassock far,
 Doffed the priest, donned the perfect cavalier.

1000

The die was cast : over shoes over boots :

And just as she, I presently shall show,
 Pompilia, soon looked Helen to the life,
 Recumbent upstairs in her pink and white,
 So, in the inn-yard, bold as 't were Troy-town, 1005
 There strutted Paris in correct costume,
 Cloak, cap and feather, no appointment missed,
 Even to a wicked-looking sword at side,
 He seemed to find and feel familiar at.
 Nor wanted words as ready and as big 1010
 As the part he played, the bold abashless one.
 "I interposed to save your wife from death,
 "Yourself from shame, the true and only shame :
 "Ask your own conscience else!—or, failing that,
 "What I have done I answer, anywhere, 1015
 "Here, if you will ; you see I have a sword :
 "Or, since I have a tonsure as you taunt,
 "At Rome, by all means,—priests to try a priest.
 "Only, speak where your wife's voice can reply !"
 And then he fingered at the sword again. 1020
 So, Guido called, in aid and witness both,
 The Public Force. The Commissary came,
 Officers also ; they secured the priest ;
 Then, for his more confusion, mounted up
 With him, a guard on either side, the stair 1025
 To the bed-room where still slept or feigned a sleep
 His paramour and Guido's wife : in burst
 The company and bade her wake and rise.

Her defence ? This. She woke, saw, sprang up-right

I' the midst and stood as terrible as truth, 1030
 Sprang to her husband's side, caught at the sword
 That hung thereuseless,—since they held each hand
 O' the lover, had disarmed him properly,—
 And in a moment out flew the bright thing
 Full in the face of Guido : but for help 1035

O' the guards who held her back and pinioned her
 With pains enough, she had finished you my tale
 With a flourish of red all round it, pinked her man
 Prettily ; but she fought them one to six.

They stopped that,—but her tongue continued free: 1040
 She spat forth such invective at her spouse,
 O'erfrothed him with such foam of murderer,
 Thief, pandar—that the popular tide soon turned,
 The favour of the very *sbirri*, straight
 Ebbed from the husband, set toward his wife, 1045
 People cried “Hands off, pay a priest respect !”
 And “persecuting fiend” and “martyred saint”
 Began to lead a measure from lip to lip.

But facts are facts and flinch not; stubborn things,
 And the question “Prithee, friend, how comes
 my purse

“I' the poke of you ?”—admits of no reply. 1050
 Here was a priest found out in masquerade,
 A wife caught playing truant if no more ;
 While the Count, mortified in mien enough,
 And, nose to face, an added palm in length, 1055
 Was plain writ “husband” every piece of him :
 Capture once made, release could hardly be.
 Beside, the prisoners both made appeal,
 “Take us to Rome !”

Taken to Rome they were ; 1060

The husband trooping after, piteously,
 Tail between legs, no talk of triumph now—
 No honour set firm on its feet once more
 On two dead bodies of the guilty,—nay,
 No dubious salve to honour's broken pate 1065
 From chance that, after all, the hurt might seem
 A skin-deep matter, scratch that leaves no scar :
 For Guido's first search,—ferreting, poor soul,
 Here, there and everywhere in the vile place

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

Abandoned to him when their backs were turned, 1070
Found,—furnishing a last and best regale,—
All the love-letters bandied 'twixt the pair
Since the first timid trembling into life
O' the love-star till its stand at fiery full.
Mad prose, mad verse, fears, hopes, triumph,
despair, 1075
Avowal, disclaimer, plans, dates, names,—was
nought
Wanting to prove, if proof consoles at all,
That this had been but the fifth act o' the piece
Whereof the due proemium, months ago
These playwrights had put forth, and ever since 1080
Matured the middle, added 'neath his nose.
He might go cross himself: the case was clear.

Therefore to Rome with the clear case; there plead
Each party its best, and leave law do each right,
Let law shine forth and show, as God in heaven,

1085
Vice prostrate, virtue pedestalled at last,
The triumph of truth! What else shall glad our
gaze

When once authority has knit the brow

And set the brain behind it to decide

Between the wolf and sheep turned litigants? 1090

“This is indeed a business!” law shook head:

“A husband charges hard things on a wife,

“The wife as hard o' the husband: whose fault
here?

“A wife that flies her husband's house, does
wrong:

“The male friend's interference looks amiss,

“Lends a suspicion: but suppose the wife,

“On the other hand, be jeopardized at home—

“Nay, that she simply hold, ill-groundedly,

“An apprehension she is jeopardized,—

“And further, if the friend partake the fear, 1100
 “And, in a commendable charity
 “Which trusteth all, trust her that she mistrusts,—
 “What do they but obey law—natural law ?
 “Pretence may this be and a cloak for sin,
 “And circumstances that concur i’ the close 1105
 “Hint as much, loudly—yet scarce loud enough
 “To drown the answer ‘strange may yet be true’:
 “Innocence often looks like guiltiness.
 “The accused declare that in thought, word and
 deed,
 “Innocent were they both from first to last 1110
 “As male-babe haply laid by female-babe
 “At church on edge of the baptismal font
 “Together for a minute, perfect-pure.
 “Difficult to believe, yet possible,
 “As witness Joseph, the friend’s patron-saint. 1115
 “The night at the inn—there charity nigh chokes
 “Ere swallow what they both asseverate ;
 “Though down the gullet faith may feel it go,
 “When mindful of what flight fatigued the flesh
 “Out of its faculty and fleshliness, 1120
 “Subdued it to the soul, as saints assure :
 “So long a flight necessitates a fall
 “On the first bed, though in a lion’s den,
 “And the first pillow, though the lion’s back :
 “Difficult to believe, yet possible. 1125
 “Last come the letters’ bundled beastliness—
 “Authority repugns give glance to—nay,
 “Turns head, and almost lets her whip-lash fall ;
 “Yet here a voice cries ‘Respite !’ from the
 clouds—
 “The accused, both in a tale, protest, disclaim, 1130
 “Abominate the horror : ‘Not my hand’
 “Asserts the friend—‘Nor mine’ chimes in the
 wife,

“‘Seeing I have no hand, nor write at all.’
 “‘Illiterate—for she goes on to ask,
 “‘What if the friend did pen now verse now prose, 1135
 “‘Commend it to her notice now and then?
 “‘T was pearls to swine: she read no more than
 wrote,
 “‘And kept no more than read, for as they fell
 “‘She ever brushed the burr-like things away,
 “‘Or, better, burned them, quenched the fire in
 smoke. 1140

“‘As for this fardel, filth and foolishness,
 “‘She sees it now the first time: burn it too!
 “‘While for his part the friend vows ignorance
 “‘Alike of what bears his name and bears hers:
 “‘T is forgery, a felon’s masterpiece, 1145
 “‘And, as ‘t is said the fox still finds the stench,
 “‘Home-manufacture and the husband’s work.
 “‘Though he confesses, the ingenuous friend,
 “‘That certain missives, letters of a sort,
 “‘Flighty and feeble, which assigned themselves 1150
 “‘To the wife, no less have fallen, far too oft,
 “‘In his path: wherefrom he understood just this—
 “‘That were they verily the lady’s own,
 “‘Why, she who penned them, since he never
 saw

“‘Save for one minute the mere face of her, 1155
 “‘Since never had there been the interchange
 “‘Of word with word between them all their life,
 “‘Why, she must be the fondest of the frail,
 “‘And fit, she for the ‘*apage*’ he flung,
 “‘Her letters for the flame they went to feed! 1160
 “‘But, now he sees her face and hears her speech,
 “‘Much he repents him if, in fancy-freak
 “‘For a moment the minutest measurable,
 “‘He coupled her with the first flimsy word
 “‘O’ the self-spun fabric some mean spider-soul 1165

“ Furnished forth : stop his films and stamp on
him !

“ Never was such a tangled knottiness,
“ But thus authority cuts the Gordian through,
“ And mark how her decision suits the need !

“ Here 's troublesomeness, scandal on both sides, 1170
“ Plenty of fault to find, no absolute crime :
“ Let each side own its fault and make amends !
“ What does a priest in cavalier's attire
“ Consorting publicly with vagrant wives
“ In quarters close as the confessional, 1175
“ Though innocent of harm ? 'T is harm enough :
“ Let him pay it,—say, be relegate a good
“ Three years, to spend in some place not too far
“ Nor yet too near, midway 'twixt near and far,
“ Rome and Arezzo,—Civita we choose, 1180
“ Where he may lounge away time, live at large,
“ Find out the proper function of a priest,
“ Nowise an exile,—that were punishment,—
“ But one our love thus keeps out of harm's way
“ Not more from the husband's anger than, mayhap 1185
“ His own . . . say, indiscretion, waywardness,
“ And wanderings when Easter eves grow warm.
“ For the wife,—well, our best step to takewith her,
“ On her own showing, were to shift her root
“ From the old cold shade and unhappy soil 1190
“ Into a generous ground that fronts the south
“ Where, since her callow soul, a-shiver late,
“ Craved simply warmth and called mere passers-by
“ To the rescue, she should have her fill of shine.
“ Do house and husband hinder and not help ? 1195
“ Why then, forget both and stay here at peace,
“ Come into our community, enroll
“ Herself along with those good Convertites,
“ Those sinners saved, those Magdalens re-made,
“ Accept their ministration, well bestow 1200

“Her body and patiently possess her soul,
 “Until we see what better can be done.
 “Last for the husband : if his tale prove true,
 “Well is he rid of two domestic plagues—
 “Both wife that ailed, do whatsoever he would, 1205
 “And friend of hers that undertook the cure.
 “See, what a double load we lift from breast !
 “Off he may go, return, resume old life,
 “Laugh at the priest here and Pompilia there
 “In limbo each and punished for their pains, 1210
 “And grateful tell the inquiring neighbourhood—
 “In Rome, no wrong but has its remedy.”
 The case was closed. Now, am I fair or no
 In what I utter ? Do I state the facts,
 Having forechosen a side ? I promised you ! 1215

The Canon Caponsacchi, then, was sent
 To change his garb, re-trim his tonsure, tie
 The clerky silk round, every plait correct,
 Make the impressive entry on his place
 Of relegation, thrill his Civita, 1220
 As Ovid, a like sufferer in the cause,
 Planted a primrose-patch by Pontus : where,—
 What with much culture of the sonnet-stave
 And converse with the aborigines,
 Soft savagery of eyes unused to roll 1225
 And hearts that all awry went pit-a-pat
 And wanted setting right in charity,—
 What were a couple of years to while away ?
 Pompilia, as enjoined, betook herself
 To the aforesaid Convertites, soft sisterhood 1230
 In Via Lungara, where the light ones live,
 Spin, pray, then sing like linnets o'er the flax.
 “Anywhere, anyhow, out of my husband's house
 “Is heaven,” cried she,—was therefore suited so.
 But for Count Guido Franceschini, he— 1235

The injured man thus righted—found no heaven
 I' the house when he returned there, I engage,
 Was welcomed by the city turned upside down
 In a chorus of inquiry. “What, back—you?
 “And no wife? Left her with the Penitents? 1240
 “Ah, being young and pretty, 't were a shame
 “To have her whipped in public: leave the job
 “To the priests who understand! Such priests
 as yours—
 “(Pontifex Maximus whipped Vestals once)
 “Our madcap Caponsacchi: think of him! 1245
 “So, he fired up, showed fight and skill of fence?
 “Ay, you drew also, but you did not fight!
 “The wiser, 't is a word and a blow with him,
 “True Caponsacchi, of old Head-i'-the-Sack
 “That fought at Fiesole ere Florence was: 1250
 “He had done enough, to firk you were too much.
 “And did the little lady menace you,
 “Make at your breast with your own harmless
 sword?
 “The spitfire! Well, thank God you 're safe and
 sound,
 “Have kept the sixth commandment whether or no 1255
 “The lady broke the seventh: I only wish
 “I were as saint-like, could contain me so.
 “I, the poor sinner, fear I should have left
 “Sir Priest no nose-tip to turn up at me!”
 You, Sir, who listen but interpose no word,
 Ask yourself, had you borne a baiting thus?
 Was it enough to make a wise man mad?
 Oh, but I 'll have your verdict at the end!

Well, not enough, it seems: such mere hurt falls,
 Frets awhile, aches long, then grows less and less, 1265
 And so gets done with. Such was not the scheme
 O' the pleasant Comparini: on Guido's wound

Ever in due succession, drop by drop,
 Came slow distilment from the alembic here
 Set on to simmer by Canidian hate, 1270
 Corrosives keeping the man's misery raw.
 First fire-drop,—when he thought to make the best
 O' the bad, to wring from out the sentence passed,
 Poor, pitiful, absurd although it were,
 Yet what might eke him out result enough 1275
 And make it worth while to have had the right
 And not the wrong i' the matter judged at Rome.
 Inadequate her punishment, no less
 Punished in some slight sort his wife had been ;
 Then, punished for adultery, what else ? 1280
 On such admitted crime he thought to seize,
 And institute procedure in the courts
 Which cut corruption of this kind from man,
 Cast loose a wife proved loose and castaway :
 He claimed in due form a divorce at least. 1285

This claim was met now by a counterclaim :
 Pompilia sought divorce from bed and board
 Of Guido, whose outrageous cruelty,
 Whose mother's malice and whose brother's hate
 Were just the white o' the charge, such dreadful
 depths 1290

Blackened its centre,—hints of worse than hate,
 Love from that brother, by that Guido's guile,
 That mother's prompting. Such reply was made,
 So was the engine loaded, wound up, sprung
 On Guido, who received bolt full in breast ; 1295
 But no less bore up, giddily perhaps.
 He had the Abate Paolo still in Rome,
 Brother and friend and fighter on his side :
 They rallied in a measure, met the foe
 Manlike, joined battle in the public courts,
 As if to shame supine law from her sloth : 1300

And waiting her award, let beat the while
 Arezzo's banter, Rome's buffoonery,
 On this ear and on that ear, deaf alike,
 Safe from worse outrage. Let a scorpion nip, 1305
 And never mind till he contorts his tail !
 But there was sting i' the creature; thus it struck.
 Guido had thought in his simplicity—
 That lying declaration of remorse,
 That story of the child which was no child 1310
 And motherhood no motherhood at all,
 —That even this sin might have its sort of good
 Inasmuch as no question more could be,—
 Call it false, call the story true,—no claim
 Of further parentage pretended now : 1315
 The parents had abjured all right, at least,
 I' the woman owned his wife : to plead right still
 Were to declare the abjuration false :
 He was relieved from any fear henceforth
 Their hands might touch, their breath defile again 1320
 Pompilia with his name upon her yet.
 Well, no : the next news was, Pompilia's health
 Demanded change after full three long weeks
 Spent in devotion with the Sisterhood,—
 Which rendered sojourn,—so the court opined,— 1325
 Too irksome, since the convent's walls were high
 And windows narrow, nor was air enough
 Nor light enough, but all looked prison-like,
 The last thing which had come in the court's head.
 Propose a new expedient therefore,—this ! 1330
 She had demanded—had obtained indeed,
 By intervention of her pitying friends
 Or perhaps lovers—(beauty in distress,
 Beauty whose tale is the town-talk beside,
 Never lacks friendship's arm about her neck)— 1335
 Obtained remission of the penalty,
 Permitted transfer to some private place

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

Where better air, more light, new food might
soothe—

Incarcerated (call it, all the same)

At some sure friend's house she must keep inside, 1340
Be found in at requirement fast enough,—

Domus pro carcere, in Roman style.

You keep the house i' the main, as most men do

And all good women : but free otherwise,

Should friends arrive, to lodge them and what not? 1345

And such a *domum*, such a dwelling-place,

Having all Rome to choose from, where chose she?

What house obtained Pompilia's preference?

Why, just the Comparini's—just, do you mark,

Theirs who renounced all part and lot in her 1350

So long as Guido could be robbed thereby,

And only fell back on relationship

And found their daughter safe and sound again

When that might surelier stab him : yes, the pair

Who, as I told you, first had baited hook

With this poor gilded fly Pompilia-thing, 1355

Then caught the fish, pulled Guido to the shore

And gutted him,—now found a further use

For the bait, would trail the gauze wings yet again

I' the way of what new swimmer passed their stand. 1360

They took Pompilia to their hiding-place—

Not in the heart of Rome as formerly,

Under observance, subject to control—

But out o' the way,—or in the way, who knows?

That blind mute villa lurking by the gate 1365

At Via Paulina, not so hard to miss

By the honest eye, easy enough to find

In twilight by marauders : where perchance

Some muffled Caponsacchi might repair,

Employ odd moments when he too tried change, 1370

Found that a friend's abode was pleasanter

Than relegation, penance and the rest.

Come, here 's the last drop does its worst to wound :
 Here 's Guido poisoned to the bone, you say,
 Your boasted still's full strain and strength: not so!
 One master-squeeze from screw shall bring to birth
 The hoard i' the heart o' the toad, hell's quint-
 essence.

He learned the true convenience of the change,
 And why a convent lacks the cheerful hearts
 And helpful hands which female straits require, 1380
 When, in the blind mute villa by the gate,
 Pompilia—what? sang, danced, saw company?
 —Gave birth, Sir, to a child, his son and heir,
 Or Guido's heir and Caponsacchi's son.

I want your word now : what do you say to this? 1385
 What would say little Arezzo and great Rome,
 And what did God say and the devil say
 One at each ear o' the man, the husband, now
 The father? Why, the overburdened mind
 Broke down, what was a brain became a blaze. 1390
 In fury of the moment—(that first news
 Fell on the Count among his vines, it seems,
 Doing his farm-work,)—why, he summoned
 steward,

Called in the first four hard hands and stout hearts
 From field and furrow, poured forth his appeal, 1395
 Not to Rome's law and gospel any more,
 But this clown with a mother or a wife,
 That clodpole with a sister or a son :
 And, whereas law and gospel held their peace,
 What wonder if the sticks and stones cried out? 1400

All five soon somehow found themselves at Rome,
 At the villa door: there was the warmth and light—
 The sense of life so just an inch inside—
 Some angel must have whispered "One more
 chance!"

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

He gave it: bade the others stand aside : 1405

Knocked at the door,—“ Who is it knocks ? ”
cried one.

“ I will make,” surely Guido’s angel urged,

“ One final essay, last experiment,

“ Speak the word, name the name from out all names

“ Which, if,—as doubtless strong illusions are, 1410

“ And strange disguisings whereby truth seems
false,

“ And, since I am but man, I dare not do

“ God’s work until assured I see with God,—

“ If I should bring my lips to breathe that name

“ And they be innocent,—nay, by one mere touch 1415

“ Of innocence redeemed from utter guilt,—

“ That name will bar the door and bid fate pass.

“ I will not say ‘ It is a messenger,

“ ‘ A neighbour, even a belated man,

“ ‘ Much less your husband’s friend, your hus-
band’s self’ : 1420

“ At such appeal the door is bound to ope.

“ But I will say”—here’s rhetoric and to spare !

Why, Sir, the stumbling-block is cursed and kicked,

Block though it be; the name that brought offence

Will bring offence : the burnt child dreads the fire 1425

Although that fire feed on some taper-wick

Which never left the altar nor singed a fly :

And had a harmless man tripped you by chance,

How would you wait him, stand or step aside,

When next you heard he rolled your way ? Enough. 1430

“ Giuseppe Caponsacchi ! ” Guido cried ;

And open flew the door : enough again.

Vengeance, you know, burst, like a mountain-wave

That holds a monster in it, over the house,

And wiped its filthy four walls free at last 1435

With a wash of hell-fire,—father, mother, wife,

Killed them all, bathed his name clean in their
blood,
And, reeking so, was caught, his friends and he,
Haled hither and imprisoned yesternight
O' the day all this was.

1440

Now, Sir, tale is told,
Of how the old couple come to lie in state
Though hacked to pieces,—never, the expert say,
So thorough a study of stabbing—while the wife
(Viper-like, very difficult to slay)

1445

Writhes still through every ring of her, poor wretch,
At the Hospital hard by—survives, we 'll hope,
To somewhat purify her putrid soul
By full confession, make so much amends
While time lasts ; since at day's end die she must.

1450

For Caponsacchi,—why, they 'll have him here,
As hero of the adventure, who so fit
To figure in the coming Carnival ?

'T will make the fortune of whate'er saloon
Hears him recount, with helpful cheek, and eye
Hotly indignant now, now dewy-dimmed,
The incidents of flight, pursuit, surprise,
Capture, with hints of kisses all between—

1455

While Guido, wholly unromantic spouse,
No longer fit to laugh at since the blood
Gave the broad farce an all too brutal air,
Why, he and those four luckless friends of his
May tumble in the straw this bitter day—
Laid by the heels i' the New Prison, I hear,
To bide their trial, since trial, and for the life,
Follows if but for form's sake : yes, indeed !

1460

1465

But with a certain issue : no dispute,
" Try him," bids law : formalities oblige :
But as to the issue,—look me in the face !—

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

If the law thinks to find them guilty, Sir, 1470
 Master or men—touch one hair of the five,
 Then I say in the name of all that 's left
 Of honour in Rome, civility i' the world
 Whereof Rome boasts herself the central source,—
 There 's an end to all hope of justice more. 1475

Astræa 's gone indeed, let hope go too !
 Who is it dares impugn the natural law,
 Deny God's word "the faithless wife shall die" ?
 What, are we blind ? How can we fail to learn
 This crowd of miseries make the man a mark, 1480
 Accumulate on one devoted head

For our example?—yours and mine who read
 Its lesson thus—"Henceforward let none dare
 "Stand, like a natural in the public way,
 "Letting the very urchins twitch his beard 1485
 "And tweak his nose, to earn a nickname so,
 "Be styled male-Grissel or else modern Job!"

Had Guido, in the twinkling of an eye,
 Summed up the reckoning, promptly paid himself,
 That morning when he came up with the pair 1490
 At the wayside inn,—exacted his just debt
 By aid of what first mattock, pitchfork, axe
 Came to hand in the helpful stable-yard,
 And with that axe, if providence so pleased,
 Cloven each head, by some Rolando-stroke, 1495
 In one clean cut from crown to clavicle,
 —Slain the priest-gallant, the wife-paramour,
 Sticking, for all defence, in each skull's cleft
 The rhyme and reason of the stroke thus dealt,
 To-wit, those letters and last evidence 1500
 Of shame, each package in its proper place,—
 Bidding, who pitied, undistend the skulls,—
 I say, the world had praised the man. But no !
 That were too plain, too straight, too simply just !
 He hesitates, calls law forsooth to help. 1505

And law, distasteful to who calls in law
 When honour is beforehand and would serve,
 What wonder if law hesitate in turn,
 Plead her disuse to calls o' the kind, reply
 (Smiling a little) "'T is yourself assess 1510
 "The worth of what's lost, sum of damage done.
 "What you touched with so light a finger-tip,
 "You whose concern it was to grasp the thing,
 "Why must law gird herself and grapple with?
 "Law, alien to the actor whose warm blood 1515
 "Asks heat from law whose veins run lukewarm
 milk,—
 "What you dealt lightly with, shall law make out
 "Heinous forsooth?"

Sir, what's the good of law
 In a case o' the kind? None, as she all but says. 1520
 Call in law when a neighbour breaks your fence,
 Cribs from your field, tampers with rent or lease,
 Touches the purse or pocket,—but woes your
 wife?

No: take the old way trod when men were men!
 Guido preferred the new path,—for his pains, 1525
 Stuck in a quagmire, floundered worse and worse
 Until he managed somehow scramble back
 Into the safe sure rutted road once more,
 Revenged his own wrong like a gentleman.
 Once back 'mid the familiar prints, no doubt 1530
 He made too rash amends for his first fault,
 Vaulted too loftily over what barred him late,
 And lit i' the mire again,—the common chance,
 The natural over-energy: the deed
 Maladroit yields three deaths instead of one, 1535
 And one life left: for where's the Canon's corpse?
 All which is the worse for Guido, but, be frank—
 The better for you and me and all the world,
 Husbands of wives, especially in Rome.

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK II

The thing is put right, in the old place,—ay, 1540
The rod hangs on its nail behind the door,
Fresh from the brine: a matter I commend
To the notice, during Carnival that 's near,
Of a certain what 's-his-name and jackanapes 1545
Somewhat too civil of eves with lute and song
About a house here, where I keep a wife.
(You, being his cousin, may go tell him so.)

III.—THE OTHER HALF-ROME

ANOTHER day that finds her living yet,
Little Pompilia, with the patient brow
And lamentable smile on those poor lips,
And, under the white hospital-array,
A flower-like body, to frighten at a bruise
You 'd think, yet now, stabbed through and
through again,

Alive i' the ruins. 'T is a miracle.

It seems that, when her husband struck her first,
She prayed Madonna just that she might live

So long as to confess and be absolved ;

And whether it was that, all her sad life long
Never before successful in a prayer,

This prayer rose with authority too dread,—

Or whether, because earth was hell to her,

By compensation, when the blackness broke

She got one glimpse of quiet and the cool blue,
To show her for a moment such things were,—

Or else,—as the Augustinian Brother thinks,

The friar who took confession from her lip,—

When a probationary soul that moved

From nobleness to nobleness, as she,

Over the rough way of the world, succumbs,

Bloodies its last thorn with unflinching foot,

The angels love to do their work betimes,

Staunch some wounds here nor leave so much for

God.

Who knows? However it be, confessed, absolved,
She lies, with overplus of life beside

THE RING AND THE ROSE. 1881.

To speak and eight herself from Pavia goes
 Right to the friend also, Lamparia, her brave
 Care for the boy's concerns to save his son
 From shame, her two sons' initiation attained. 50
 And—with best smile of all—especial for him—
 A son that she and her husband from the house
 Of misfortune call, our Nolnista!

'There she lies in the long white Lazar-house. 55
 Home has besieged, these two days, never doubt,
 Saint Anna's where she waits for death, to bear
 Though but the chick o' the well, turr o' the king.
 When the reluctant wicket opes at last,

Lets in, on now this and that a trifle.

Too many by half,—complain the men of art,—
 For a patient in such plight. The lawyers first
 Paid the due visit—justice must be done:

They took her witness, why the murderer was,
 Then the priests followed properly,—a soul

To shrive: 't was Brother Celestine's own right,
 The same who noises thus her gifts abroad.

But many more, who found they were old friends,
 Pushed in to have their stare and take their talk
 And go forth boasting of it and to boast.

Old Monna Baldi chatters like a jay,
 Swears—but that, prematurely trundled out
 Just as she felt the benefit begin,

The miracle was snapped up by somebody,—
 Her palsied limb 'gan prick and promise life

At touch o' the bedclothes merely,—how much
 more

Had she but brushed the body as she tried!
 Cavalier Carlo—well, there's some excuse
 For him—Maratta who paints Virgins so—
 He too must fee the porter and slip by
 With pencil cut and paper squared, and straight

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK III

To speak and right herself from first to last,
 Right the friend also, lamb-pure, lion-brave,
 Care for the boy's concerns, to save the son 30
 From the sire, her two-weeks' infant orphaned thus,
 And—with best smile of all reserved for him—
 Pardon that sire and husband from the heart.
 A miracle, so tell your Molinists !

There she lies in the long white lazarus-house. 35
 Rome has besieged, these two days, never doubt,
 Saint Anna's where she waits her death, to hear
 Though but the chink o' the bell, turn o' the hinge
 When the reluctant wicket opes at last,
 Lets in, on now this and now that pretence, 40
 Too many by half,—complain the men of art,—
 For a patient in such plight. The lawyers first
 Paid the due visit—justice must be done ;
 They took her witness, why the murder was.
 Then the priests followed properly,—a soul 45
 To shrive ; 't was Brother Celestine's own right,
 The same who noises thus her gifts abroad.
 But many more, who found they were old friends,
 Pushed in to have their stare and take their talk
 And go forth boasting of it and to boast. 50
 Old Monna Baldi chatters like a jay,
 Swears—but that, prematurely trundled out
 Just as she felt the benefit begin,
 The miracle was snapped up by somebody,—
 Her palsied limb 'gan prick and promise life 55
 At touch o' the bedclothes merely,—how much
 more
 Had she but brushed the body as she tried !
 Cavalier Carlo—well, there 's some excuse
 For him—Maratta who paints Virgins so—
 He too must fee the porter and slip by 60
 With pencil cut and paper squared, and straight

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

There was he figuring away at face :

"A lovelier face is not in Rome," cried he,

"Shaped like a peacock's egg, the pure as pearl,

"That hatches you anon a snow-white chick." 65

Then, oh that pair of eyes, that pendent hair,

Black this and black the other ! Mighty fine—

But nobody cared ask to paint the same,

Nor grew a poet over hair and eyes

Four little years ago when, ask and have, 70

The woman who wakes all this rapture leaned

Flower-like from out her window long enough,

As much uncomplimented as uncropped

By comers and goers in Via Vittoria : eh ?

'T is just a flower's fate : past parterre we trip, 75

Till peradventure someone plucks our sleeve—

"Yon blossom at the briar's end, that 's the rose

"Two jealous people fought for yesterday

"And killed each other : see, there 's undisturbed

"A pretty pool at the root, of rival red !" 80

Then cry we "Ah, the perfect paragon !"

Then crave we "Just one keepsake-leaf for us !"

Truth lies between : there 's anyhow a child

Of seventeen years, whether a flower or weed,

Ruined : who did it shall account to Christ— 85

Having no pity on the harmless life

And gentle face and girlish form he found,

And thus flings back. Go practise if you please

With men and women : leave a child alone

For Christ's particular love's sake !—so I say. 90

Somebody, at the bedside, said much more,

Took on him to explain the secret cause

O' the crime : quoth he, "Such crimes are very rife,

"Explode nor make us wonder now-a-days,

"Seeing that Antichrist disseminates 95

“That doctrine of the Philosophic Sin :

“Molinos’ sect will soon make earth too hot !”

“Nay,” groaned the Augustinian, “what’s there new ?

“Crime will not fail to flare up from men’s hearts

“While hearts are men’s and so born criminal ;” 100

“Which one fact, always old yet ever new,

“Accounts for so much crime that, for my part,

“Molinos may go whistle to the wind

“That waits outside a certain church, you know !”

Though really it does seem as if she here,

105

Pompilia, living so and dying thus,

Has had undue experience how much crime

A heart can hatch. Why was she made to learn

—Not you, not I, not even Molinos’ self—

What Guido Franceschini’s heart could hold ?

110

Thus saintship is effected probably ;

No sparing saints the process !—which the more

Tends to the reconciling us, no saints,

To sinnership, immunity and all.

For see now : Pietro and Violante’s life

115

Till seventeen years ago, all Rome might note

And quote for happy—see the signs distinct

Of happiness as we yon Triton’s trump.

What could they be but happy ?—balanced so,

Nor low i’ the social scale nor yet too high,

120

Nor poor nor richer than comports with ease,

Nor bright and envied, nor obscure and scorned,

Nor so young that their pleasures fell too thick,

Nor old past catching pleasure when it fell,

Nothing above, below the just degree,

125

All at the mean where joy’s components mix.

So again, in the couple’s very souls

You saw the adequate half with half to match,

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Each having and each lacking somewhat, both
Making a whole that had all and lacked nought. 130
The round and sound, in whose composure just
The acquiescent and recipient side
Was Pietro's, and the stirring striving one
Violante's: both in union gave the due
Quietude, enterprise, craving and content, 135
Which go to bodily health and peace of mind.
But, as 't is said a body, rightly mixed,
Each element in equipoise, would last
Too long and live for ever,—accordingly
Holds a germ—sand-grain weight too much i' the
scale— 140

Ordained to get predominance one day
And so bring all to ruin and release,—
Not otherwise a fatal germ lurked here :
“With mortals much must go, but something stays ;
“Nothing will stay of our so happy selves.” 145
Out of the very ripeness of life's core
A worm was bred—“Our life shall leave no fruit.”
Enough of bliss, they thought, could bliss bear
seed,
Yield its like, propagate a bliss in turn
And keep the kind up ; not supplant themselves 150
But put in evidence, record they were,
Show them, when done with, i' the shape of a child.
“T is in a child, man and wife grow complete,
“One flesh : God says so : let him do his work !”

Now, one reminder of this gnawing want, 155
One special prick o' the maggot at the core,
Always befell when, as the day came round,
A certain yearly sum,—our Pietro being,
As the long name runs, an usufructuary,—
Dropped in the common bag as interest 160
Of money, his till death, not afterward,

Failing an heir : an heir would take and take,
 A child of theirs be wealthy in their place
 To nobody's hurt—the stranger else seized all.
 Prosperity rolled river-like and stopped, 165
 Making their mill go ; but when wheel wore out,
 The wave would find a space and sweep on free
 And, half-a-mile off, grind some neighbour's corn.

Adam-like, Pietro sighed and said no more :
 Eve saw the apple was fair and good to taste, 170
 So, plucked it, having asked the snake advice.
 She told her husband God was merciful,
 And his and her prayer granted at the last :
 Let the old mill-stone moulder,—wheel unworn,
 Quartz from the quarry, shot into the stream 175
 Adroitly, as before should go bring grist—
 Their house continued to them by an heir,
 Their vacant heart replenished with a child.
 We have her own confession at full length
 Made in the first remorse : 't was Jubilee 180
 Pealed in the ear o' the conscience and it woke.
 She found she had offended God no doubt,
 So much was plain from what had happened since,
 Misfortune on misfortune ; but she harmed
 No one i' the world, so far as she could see. 185
 The act had gladdened Pietro to the height,
 Her spouse whom God himself must gladden so
 Or not at all : thus much seems probable
 From the implicit faith, or rather say
 Stupid credulity of the foolish man 190
 Who swallowed such a tale nor strained a whit
 Even at his wife's far-over-fifty years
 Matching his sixty-and-under. Him she blessed ;
 And as for doing any detriment
 To the veritable heir,—why, tell her first 195
 Who was he ? Which of all the hands held up

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

I' the crowd, one day would gather round their gate,
Did she so wrong by intercepting thus
The ducat, spendthrift fortune thought to fling
For a scramble just to make the mob break shins ? 200
She kept it, saved them kicks and cuffs thereby.
While at the least one good work had she wrought,
Good, clearly and incontestably ! Her cheat—
What was it to its subject, the child's self,
But charity and religion ? See the girl ! 205
A body most like—a soul too probably—
Doomed to death, such a double death as waits
The illicit offspring of a common trull,
Sure to resent and forthwith rid herself
Of a mere interruption to sin's trade, 210
In the efficacious way old Tiber knows.
Was not so much proved by the ready sale
O' the child, glad transfer of this irksome chance ?
Well then, she had caught up this castaway :
This fragile egg, some careless wild bird dropped, 215
She had picked from where it waited the foot-fall,
And put in her own breast till forth broke finch
Able to sing God praise on mornings now.
What so excessive harm was done ?—she asked.

To which demand the dreadful answer comes— 220
For that same deed, now at Lorenzo's church,
Both agents, conscious and unconscious, lie ;
While she, the deed was done to benefit,
Lies also, the most lamentable of things,
Yonder where curious people count her breaths, 225
Calculate how long yet the little life
Unspilt may serve their turn nor spoil the show,
Give them their story, then the church its group.

Well, having gained Pompilia, the girl grew
I' the midst of Pietro here, Violante there, 230

Each, like a semicircle with stretched arms,
 Joining the other round her preciousness—
 Two walls that go about a garden-plot
 Where a chance sliver, branchlet slipt from bole
 Of some tongue-leaved eye-figured Eden tree, 235
 Filched by two exiles and borne far away,
 Patiently glorifies their solitude,—
 Year by year mounting, grade by grade surmounts
 The builded brick-work, yet is compassed still,
 Still hidden happily and shielded safe,— 240
 Else why should miracle have graced the ground ?
 But on the twelfth sun that brought April there
 What meant that laugh ? The coping-stone was
 reached ;
 Nay, above towered a light tuft of bloom
 To be toyed with by butterfly or bee, 245
 Done good to or else harm to from outside :
 Pompilia's root, stalk and a branch or two
 Home enclosed still, the rest would be the world's.
 All which was taught our couple though obtuse,
 Since walls have ears, when one day brought a priest, 250
 Smooth-mannered soft-speeched sleek-cheeked
 visitor,
 The notable Abate Paolo—known
 As younger brother of a Tuscan house
 Whereof the actual representative,
 Count Guido, had employed his youth and age 255
 In culture of Rome's most productive plant—
 A cardinal : but years pass and change comes,
 In token of which, here was our Paolo brought
 To broach a weighty business. Might he speak ?
 Yes—to Violante somehow caught alone 260
 While Pietro took his after-dinner doze,
 And the young maiden, busily as befits,
 Minded her broider-frame three chambers off.

So—giving now his great flap-hat a gloss
 With flat o' the hand between-whiles, soothing now 265
 The silk from out its creases o'er the calf,
 Setting the stocking clerical again,
 But never disengaging, once engaged,
 The thin clear grey hold of his eyes on her—
 He dissertated on that Tuscan house, 270
 Those Franceschini,—very old they were—
 Not rich however—oh, not rich, at least,
 As people look to be who, low i' the scale
 One way, have reason, rising all they can
 By favour of the money-bag ! 't is fair— 275
 Do all gifts go together ? But don't suppose
 That being not so rich means all so poor !
 Say rather, well enough—i' the way, indeed,
 Ha, ha, to fortune better than the best :
 Since if his brother's patron-friend kept faith, 280
 Put into promised play the Cardinalate,
 Their house might wear the red cloth that keeps
 warm,
 Would but the Count have patience—there 's the
 point !
 For he was slipping into years apace,
 And years make men restless—they needs must spy 285
 Some certainty, some sort of end assured,
 Some sparkle, tho' from topmost beacon-tip,
 That warrants life a harbour through the haze.
 In short, call him fantastic as you choose,
 Guido was home-sick, yearned for the old sights 290
 And usual faces,—fain would settle himself
 And have the patron's bounty when it fell
 Irrigate far rather than deluge near,
 Go fertilize Arezzo, not flood Rome.
 Sooth to say, 't was the wiser wish : the Count 295
 Proved wanting in ambition,—let us avouch,
 Since truth is best,—in callousness of heart,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK III

And winced at pin-pricks whereby honours hang
 A ribbon o'er each puncture : his—no soul
 Ecclesiastic (here the hat was brushed) 300
 Humble but self-sustaining, calm and cold,
 Having, as one who puts his hand to the
 plough,
 Renounced the over-vivid family-feel—
 Poor brother Guido ! All too plain, he pined
 Amid Rome's pomp and glare for dinginess 305
 And that dilapidated palace-shell
 Vast as a quarry and, very like, as bare—
 Since to this comes old grandeur now-a-days—
 Or that absurd wild villa in the waste
 O' the hill side, breezy though, for who likes air, 310
 Vittiano, nor unpleasant with its vines,
 Outside the city and the summer heats.
 And now his harping on this one tense chord
 The villa and the palace, palace this
 And villa the other, all day and all night 315
 Creaked like the implacable cicala's cry
 And made one's ear-drum ache : nought else would
 serve
 But that, to light his mother's visage up
 With second youth, hope, gaiety again,
 He must find straightway, woo and haply win 320
 And bear away triumphant back, some wife.
 Well now, the man was rational in his way :
 He, the Abate,—ought he to interpose ?
 Unless by straining still his tutelage
 (Priesthood leaps over elder-brothership) 325
 Across this difficulty : then let go,
 Leave the poor fellow in peace ! Would that be
 wrong ?
 There was no making Guido great, it seems,
 Spite of himself : then happy be his dole !
 Indeed, the Abate's little interest 330

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Was somewhat nearly touched i' the case, they
saw :

Since if his simple kinsman so were bent,
Began his rounds in Rome to catch a wife,
Full soon would such unworldliness surprise
The rare bird, sprinkle salt on phoenix' tail,
And so secure the nest a sparrow-hawk.

335

No lack of mothers here in Rome,—no dread
Of daughters lured as larks by looking-glass !
The first name-pecking credit-scratching fowl
Would drop her unfledged cuckoo in our nest
To gather greyness there, give voice at length
And shame the brood . . . but it was long ago
When crusades were, and we sent eagles forth !
No, that at least the Abate could forestall.

340

He read the thought within his brother's word,
Knew what he purposed better than himself.
We want no name and fame—having our own :
No worldly aggrandizement—such we fly :

345

But if some wonder of a woman's-heart
Were yet untainted on this grimy earth,
Tender and true—tradition tells of such—
Prepared to pant in time and tune with ours—
If some good girl (a girl, since she must take
The new bent, live new life, adopt new modes)
Not wealthy (Guido for his rank was poor)
But with whatever dowry came to hand,—
There were the lady-love predestinate !
And somehow the Abate's guardian eye—
Scintillant, rutilant, fraternal fire,—
Roving round every way had seized the prize
—The instinct of us, we, the spirituality !
Come, cards on table ; was it true or false
That here—here in this very tenement—
Yea, Via Vittoria did a marvel hide,
Lily of a maiden, white with intact leaf

350

355

360

365

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK III

Guessed thro' the sheath that saved it from the sun?
 A daughter with the mother's hands still clasped
 Over her head for fillet virginal,
 A wife worth Guido's house and hand and heart?
 He came to see; had spoken, he could no less— 370
 (A final cherish of the stockinged calf)
 If harm were,—well, the matter was off his mind.

Then with the great air did he kiss, devout,
 Violante's hand, and rise up his whole height
 (A certain purple gleam about the black) 375
 And go forth grandly,—as if the Pope came next.
 And so Violante rubbed her eyes awhile,
 Got up too, walked to wake her Pietro soon
 And pour into his ear the mighty news
 How somebody had somehow somewhere seen 380
 Their tree-top-tuft of bloom above the wall,
 And came now to apprise them the tree's self
 Was no such crab-sort as should go feed swine,
 But veritable gold, the Hesperian ball
 Ordained for Hercules to haste and pluck, 385
 And bear and give the Gods to banquet with—
 Hercules standing ready at the door.
 Whereon did Pietro rub his eyes in turn,
 Look very wise, a little woeful too,
 Then, periwig on head, and cane in hand, 390
 Sally forth dignifiedly into the Square
 Of Spain across Babbuino the six steps,
 Toward the Boat-fountain where our idlers
 lounge,—
 Ask, for form's sake, who Hercules might be,
 And have congratulation from the world. 395

Heartily laughed the world in his fool's-face
 And told him Hercules was just the heir
 To the stubble once a corn-field, and brick-heap

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Where used to be a dwelling-place now burned.
Guido and Franceschini ; a Count,—ay :
But a cross i' the poke to bless the Countship ?
No !

All gone except sloth, pride, rapacity,
Humours of the imposthume incident
To rich blood that runs thin,—nursed to a head
By the rankly-salted soil—a cardinal's court 405
Where, parasite and picker-up of crumbs,
He had hung on long, and now, let go, said some,
Shaken off, said others,—but in any case
Tired of the trade and something worse for wear,
Was wanting to change town for country quick, 410
Go home again : let Pietro help him home !
The brother, Abate Paolo, shrewder mouse,
Had pricked for comfortable quarters, inched
Into the core of Rome, and fattened so ;
But Guido, over-burly for rat's hole 415
Suited to clerical slimness, starved outside,
Must shift for himself : and so the shift was this !
What, was the snug retreat of Pietro tracked,
The little provision for his old age snuffed ?
“ Oh, make your girl a lady, an you list, 420
“ But have more mercy on our wit than vaunt
“ Your bargain as we burgesses who brag !
“ Why, Goodman Dullard, if a friend must speak,
“ Would the Count, think you, stoop to you and
yours
“ Were there the value of one penny-piece 425
“ To rattle 'twixt his palms—or likelier laugh,
“ Bid your Pompilia help you black his shoe ? ”

Home again, shaking oft the puzzled pate,
Went Pietro to announce a change indeed,
Yet point Violante where some solace lay
Of a rueful sort,—the taper, quenched so soon, 430

Had ended merely in a snuff, not stink—
 Congratulate there was one hope the less
 Not misery the more: and so an end.

The marriage thus impossible, the rest 435
 Followed: our spokesman, Paolo, heard his fate,
 Resignedly Count Guido bore the blow:
 Violante wiped away the transient tear,
 Renounced the playing Danae to gold dreams,
 Praised much her Pietro's prompt sagaciousness, 440
 Found neighbours' envy natural, lightly laughed
 At gossips' malice, fairly wrapped herself
 In her integrity three folds about,
 And, letting pass a little day or two,
 Threw, even over that integrity, 445
 Another wrappage, namely one thick veil
 That hid her, matron-wise, from head to foot,
 And, by the hand holding a girl veiled too,
 Stood, one dim end of a December day,
 In Saint Lorenzo on the altar-step— 450
 Just where she lies now and that girl will lie—
 Only with fifty candles' company
 Now, in the place of the poor winking one
 Which saw,—doorsshut and sacristan made sure,—
 A priest—perhaps Abate Paolo—wed 455
 Guido clandestinely, irrevocably
 To his Pompilia aged thirteen years
 And five months,—witness the church register,—
 Pompilia, (thus become Count Guido's wife
 Clandestinely, irrevocably his,) 460
 Who all the while had borne, from first to last,
 As brisk a part i' the bargain, as yon lamb,
 Brought forth from basket and set out for sale,
 Bears while they chaffer, wary market-man
 And voluble housewife, o'er it,—each in turn
 Patting the curly calm unconscious head, 465

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

With the shambles ready round the corner there,
When the talk 's talked out and a bargain struck.

Transfer complete, why, Pietro was apprised.
Violante sobbed the sobs and prayed the prayers 470
And said the serpent tempted so she fell,
Till Pietro had to clear his brow apace
And make the best of matters : wrath at first,—
How else ? pacification presently,
Why not?—could flesh withstand the impurled one, 475
The very Cardinal, Paolo's patron-friend ?
Who, justifiably surnamed "a hinge,"
Knew where the mollifying oil should drop
To cure the creak o' the valve,—considerate
For frailty, patient in a naughty world. 480
He even volunteered to supervise
The rough draught of those marriage-articles
Signed in a hurry by Pietro, since revoked :
Trust 's politic, suspicion does the harm,
There is but one way to brow-beat this world, 485
Dumb-founder doubt, and repay scorn in kind,—
To go on trusting, namely, till faith move
Mountains.

And faith here made the mountains move.
Why, friends whose zeal cried "Caution ere too
late!"— 490

Bade "Pause ere jump, with both feet joined, on
slough!"—

Counselled "If rashness then, now temperance!"—
Heard for their pains that Pietro had closed eyes,

Jumped and was in the middle of the mire,
Money and all, just what should sink a man. 495

By the mere marriage, Guido gained forthwith
Dowry, his wife's right ; no rescinding there :
But Pietro, why must he needs ratify

One gift Violante gave, pay down one doit
 Promised in first fool's-flurry ? Grasp the bag 500
 Lest the son's service flag,—is reason and rhyme,
 Above all when the son 's a son-in-law.
 Words to the wind ! The parents cast their lot
 Into the lap o' the daughter : and the son
 Now with a right to lie there, took what fell, 505
 Pietro's whole having and holding, house and field,
 Goods, chattels and effects, his worldly worth
 Present and in perspective, all renounced
 In favour of Guido. As for the usufruct—
 The interest now, the principal anon, 510
 Would Guido please to wait, at Pietro's death :
 Till when, he must support the couple's charge,
 Bear with them, housemates, pensionaries, pawned
 To an alien for fulfilment of their pact.
 Guido should at discretion deal them orts, 515
 Bread-bounty in Arezzo the strange place,—
 They who had lived deliciously and rolled
 Rome's choicest comfit 'neath the tongue before.
 Into this quag, "jump" bade the Cardinal !
 And neck-deep in a minute there flounced they. 520

But they touched bottom at Arezzo : there—
 Four months' experience of how craft and greed
 Quickened by penury and pretentious hate
 Of plain truth, brutify and bestialize,—
 Four months' taste of apportioned insolence, 525
 Cruelty graduated, dose by dose
 Of ruffianism dealt out at bed and board,
 And lo, the work was done, success clapped hands.
 The starved, stripped, beaten brace of stupid dupes
 Broke at last in their desperation loose, 530
 Fled away for their lives, and lucky so ;
 Found their account in casting coat afar
 And bearing off a shred of skin at least :

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Left Guido lord o' the prey, as the lion is,
And, careless what came after, carried their wrongs 535
To Rome,—I nothing doubt, with such remorse
As folly feels, since pain can make it wise,
But crime, past wisdom, which is innocence,
Needs not be plagued with till a later day.

Pietro went back to beg from door to door, 540
In hope that memory not quite extinct
Of cheery days and festive nights would move
Friends and acquaintance—after the natural laugh,
And tributary “Just as we foretold—”
To show some bowels, give the dregs o' the cup, 545
Scraps of the trencher, to their host that was,
Or let him share the mat with the mastiff, he
Who lived large and kept open house so long.
Not so Violante : ever a-head i' the march,
Quick at the bye-road and the cut-across, 550
She went first to the best adviser, God—
Whose finger unmistakably was felt
In all this retribution of the past.
Here was the prize of sin, luck of a lie !
But here too was what Holy Year would help, 555
Bound to rid sinners of sin vulgar, sin
Abnormal, sin prodigious, up to sin
Impossible and supposed for Jubilee' sake :
To lift the leadenest of lies, let soar
The soul unhampered by a feather-weight. 560
“I will” said she “go burn out this bad hole
“That breeds the scorpion, baulk the plague atleast
“Of hope to further plague by progeny :
“I will confess my fault, be punished, yes,
“But pardoned too : Saint Peter pays for all.” 565

So, with the crowd she mixed, made for the dome,
Through the great door new-broken for the nonce

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK III

Marched, muffled more than ever matron-wise,
 Up the left nave to the formidable throne,
 Fell into file with this the poisoner 570
 And that the parricide, and reached in turn
 The poor repugnant Penitentiary
 Set at this gully-hole o' the world's discharge
 To help the frightfullest of filth have vent,
 And then knelt down and whispered in his ear 575
 How she had bought Pompilia, palmed the babe
 On Pietro, passed the girl off as their child
 To Guido, and defrauded of his due
 This one and that one,—more than she could name,
 Until her solid piece of wickedness 580
 Happened to split and spread woe far and wide :
 Contritely now she brought the case for cure.

Replied the throne—"Ere God forgive the guilt,
 " Make man some restitution ! Do your part !
 " The owners of your husband's heritage, 585
 " Barred thence by this pretended birth and heir,—
 " Tell them, the bar came so, is broken so,
 " Theirs be the due reversion as before !
 " Your husband who, no partner in the guilt,
 " Suffers the penalty, led blindfold thus 590
 " By love of what he thought his flesh and blood
 " To alienate his all in her behalf,—
 " Tell him too such contract is null and void !
 " Last, he who personates your son-in-law,
 " Who with sealed eyes and stopped ears, tame 595
 and mute
 " Took at your hand that bastard of a whore
 " You called your daughter and he calls his wife,—
 " Tell him, and bear the anger which is just !
 " Then, penance so performed, may pardon be !"

Who could gainsay this just and right award ? 600
 Nobody in the world : but, out o' the world,

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Who knows?—might timid intervention be
From any makeshift of an angel-guide,
Substitute for celestial guardianship,
Pretending to take care of the girl's self : 605
“Woman, confessing crime is healthy work,
“And telling truth relieves a liar like you,
“But how of my quite unconsidered charge?
“No thought if, while this good befalls yourself,
“Aught in the way of harm may find out her?” 610
No least thought, I assure you: truth being truth,
Tell it and shame the devil!

Said and done :

Home went Violante, and disbosomed all :
And Pietro who, six months before, had borne 615
Word after word of such a piece of news
Like so much cold steel inched through his breast-
blade,
Now at its entry gave a leap for joy,
As who—what did I say of one in a quag?—
Should catch a hand from heaven and spring
thereby 620

Out of the mud, on ten toes stand once more.
“What? All that used to be, may be again?
“My money mine again, my house, my land,
“My chairs and tables, all mine evermore?
“What, the girl's dowry never was the girl's, 625
“And, unpaid yet, is never now to pay?
“Then the girl's self, my pale Pompilia child
“That used to be my own with her great eyes—
“He who drove us forth, why should he keep her
“When proved as very a pauper as himself? 630
“Will she come back, with nothing changed at
all,
“And laugh ‘But how you dreamed uneasily!
“‘I saw the great drops stand here on your brow—
“‘Did I do wrong to wake you with a kiss?’

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK III

“No, indeed, darling ! No, for wide awake 635
 “I see another outburst of surprise :
 “The lout-lord, bully-beggar, braggart-sneak,
 “Who not content with cutting purse, crops ear—
 “Assuredly it shall be salve to mine
 “When this great news red-letters him, the rogue ! 640
 “Ay, let him taste the teeth o’ the trap, this fox,
 “Give us our lamb back, golden fleece and all,
 “Let her creep in and warm our breasts again !
 “Why care for the past ? We three are our old
 selves,
 “And know now what the outside world is worth.” 645
 And so, he carried case before the courts ;
 And there Violante, blushing to the bone,
 Made public declaration of her fault,
 Renounced her motherhood, and prayed the law
 To interpose, frustrate of its effect 650
 Her folly, and redress the injury done.

Whereof was the disastrous consequence,
 That though indisputably clear the case
 (For thirteen years are not so large a lapse,
 And still six witnesses survived in Rome 655
 To prove the truth o’ the tale)—yet, patent wrong
 Seemed Guido’s ; the first cheat had chanced on
 him :

Here was the pity that, deciding right,
 Those who began the wrong would gain the prize.
 Guido pronounced the story one long lie 660
 Lied to do robbery and take revenge :
 Or say it were no lie at all but truth,
 Then, it both robbed the right heirs and shamed
 him

Without revenge to humanize the deed :
 What had he done when first they shamed him
 thus ? 665

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

But that were too fantastic : losels they,
And leasing this world's-wonder of a lie,
They lied to blot him though it brand themselves.

So answered Guido through the Abate's mouth.

Wherefore the court, its customary way, 670
Inclined to the middle course the sage affect.

They held the child to be a changeling,—good :

But, lest the husband got no good thereby,
They willed the dowry, though not hers at all,
Should yet be his, if not by right then grace— 675
Part-payment for the plain injustice done.

As for that other contract, Pietro's work,

Renunciation of his own estate,

That must be cancelled—give him back his gifts,
He was no party to the cheat at least ! 680

So ran the judgment :—whence a prompt appeal
On both sides, seeing right is absolute.

Cried Pietro “ Is the child no child of mine ?

“ Why give her a child's dowry ? ”—“ Have I right
“ To the dowry, why not to the rest as well ? ” 685

Cried Guido, or cried Paolo in his name :

Till law said “ Reinvestigate the case ! ”

And so the matter pends, to this same day.

Hence new disaster—here no outlet seemed ;
Whatever the fortune of the battle-field, 690

No path whereby the fatal man might march

Victorious, wreath on head and spoils in hand,
And back turned full upon the baffled foe,—

Nor cranny whence, desperate and disgraced,
Stripped to the skin, he might be fain to crawl 695

Worm-like, and so away with his defeat

To other fortune and a novel prey.

No, he was pinned to the place there, left alone
With his immense hate and, the solitary

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK III

Subject to satisfy that hate, his wife.

"Cast her off? Turn her naked out of doors?

"Easily said! But still the action pends,

"Still dowry, principal and interest,

"Pietro's possessions, all I bargained for,—

"Any good day, be but my friends alert,

"May give them me if she continue mine.

"Yet, keep her? Keep the puppet of my foes—

"Her voice that lisps me back their curse—her eye

"They lend their leer of triumph to—her lip

"I touch and taste their very filth upon?"

In short, he also took the middle course
 Rome taught him—did at last excogitate
 How he might keep the good and leave the bad
 Twined in revenge, yet extricable,—nay
 Make the very hate's eruption, very rush
 Of the unpent sluice of cruelty relieve
 His heart first, then go fertilize his field.
 What if the girl-wife, tortured with due care,
 Should take, as though spontaneously, the road
 It were impolitic to thrust her on?

If, goaded, she broke out in full revolt,
 Followed her parents i' the face o' the world,
 Branded as runaway not castaway,
 Self-sentenced and self-punished in the act?
 So should the loathed form and detested face
 Launch themselves into hell and there be lost
 While he looked o'er the brink with folded arms;
 So should the heaped-up shames goshuddering back
 O' the head o' the heapers, Pietro and his wife,
 And bury in the breakage three at once:

While Guido, left free, no one right renounced,
 Gain present, gain prospective, all the gain,
 None of the wife except her rights absorbed,
 Should ask law what it was law paused about—

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BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

If law were dubious still whose word to take, 735
The husband's—dignified and derelict,
Or the wife's—the . . . what I tell you. It should be.

Guido's first step was to take pen, indite
A letter to the Abate,—not his own,
His wife's,—she should re-write, sign, seal and
send. 740

She liberally told the household-news,
Rejoiced her vile progenitors were gone,
Revealed their malice—how they even laid
A last injunction on her, when they fled,
That she should forthwith find a paramour, 745
Complot with him to gather spoil enough,
Then burn the house down,—taking previous care
To poison all its inmates overnight,—
And so companioned, so provisioned too,
Follow to Rome and there join fortunes gay. 750

This letter, traced in pencil-characters,
Guido as easily got re-traced in ink
By his wife's pen, guided from end to end,
As if it had been just so much Chinese.
For why? That wife could broider, sing perhaps, 755
Pray certainly, but no more read than write
This letter "which yet write she must," he said,
"Being half courtesy and compliment,
"Half sisterliness: take the thing on trust!"

She had as readily re-traced the words 760
Of her own death-warrant,—in some sort 't was so.
This letter the Abate in due course
Communicated to such curious souls
In Rome as needs must pry into the cause
Of quarrel, why the Comparini fled 765
The Franceschini, whence the grievance grew,
What the hubbub meant: "Nay,—see the wife's
own word,

“Authentic answer ! Tell detractors too
 “There’s a plan formed, a programme figured here
 “—Pray God no after-practice put to proof, 770
 “This letter cast no light upon, one day !”

So much for what should work in Rome: back now
 To Arezzo, follow up the project there,
 Forward the next step with as bold a foot,
 And plague Pompilia to the height, you see ! 775
 Accordingly did Guido set himself
 To worry up and down, across, around,
 The woman, hemmed in by her household-bars,—
 Chase her about the coop of daily life,
 Having first stopped each outlet thence save one 780
 Which, like bird with a ferret in her haunt,
 She needs must seize as sole way of escape
 Though there was tied and twittering a decoy
 To seem as if it tempted,—just the plume
 O’ the popinjay, not a real respite there 785
 From tooth and claw of something in the dark,—
 Giuseppe Caponsacchi.

Now begins

The tenebrious passage of the tale :
 How hold a light, display the cavern’s gorge ? 790
 How, in this phase of the affair, show truth ?
 Here is the dying wife who smiles and says
 “So it was,—so it was not,—how it was,
 “I never knew nor ever care to know—”
 Till they all weep, physician, man of law,
 Even that poor old bit of battered brass 795
 Beaten out of all shape by the world’s sins,
 Common utensil of the lazarus-house—
 Confessor Celestino groans “’T is truth,
 “All truth and only truth : there’s something here, 800
 “Some presence in the room beside us all,
 “Something that every lie expires before :

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

“No question she was pure from first to last.”

So far is well and helps us to believe :

But beyond, she the helpless, simple-sweet

805

Or silly-sooth, unskilled to break one blow

At her good fame by putting finger forth,—

How can she render service to the truth ?

The bird says “So I fluttered where a springe

“Caught me : the springe did not contrive itself, 810

“That I know : who contrived it, God forgive !”

But we, who hear no voice and have dry eyes,

Must ask,—we cannot else, absolving her,—

How of the part played by that same decoy

I’ the catching, caging ? Was himself caught

first ?

815

We deal here with no innocent at least,

No witless victim,—he’s a man of the age

And priest beside,—persuade the mocking world

Mere charity boiled over in this sort !

He whose own safety too,—(the Pope’s apprised— 820

Good-natured with the secular offence,

The Pope looks grave on priesthood in a scrape)

Our priest’s own safety therefore, may-be life,

Hangs on the issue ! You will find it hard.

Guido is here to meet you with fixed foot,

825

Stiff like a statue—“Leave what went before !

“My wife fled i’ the company of a priest,

“Spent two days and two nights alone with him :

“Leave what came after !” He stands hard to
throw.

Moreover priests are merely flesh and blood ;

830

When we get weakness, and no guilt beside,

’Tis no such great ill-fortune : finding grey,

We gladly call that white which might be black,

Too used to the double-dye. So, if the priest,

Moved by Pompilia’s youth and beauty, gave

835

Way to the natural weakness. . . . Anyhow

Here be facts, charactery ; what they spell
 Determine, and thence pick what sense you may !
 There was a certain young bold handsome priest
 Popular in the city, far and wide 840

Famed, since Arezzo 's but a little place,
 As the best of good companions, gay and grave
 At the decent minute ; settled in his stall,
 Or sidling, lute on lap, by lady's couch,
 Ever the courtly Canon ; see in him 845

A proper star to climb and culminate,
 Have its due handbreadth of the heaven at Rome,
 Though meanwhile pausing on Arezzo's edge,
 As modest candle does 'mid mountain fog,
 To rub off redness and rusticity 850

Ere it sweep chastened, gain the silver-sphere !
 Whether through Guido's absence or what else,
 This Caponsacchi, favourite of the town,
 Was yet no friend of his nor free o' the house,
 Though both moved in the regular magnates' 855

 march :

Each must observe the other's tread and halt
 At church, saloon, theatre, house of play.
 Who could help noticing the husband's slouch,
 The black of his brow—or miss the news that
 buzzed

Of how the little solitary wife 860
 Wept and looked out of window all day long ?
 What need of minute search into such springs
 As start men, set o' the move ?—machinery
 Old as earth, obvious as the noonday sun.

Why, take men as they come,—an instance now,— 865
 Of all those who have simply gone to see
 Pompilia on her deathbed since four days,
 Half at the least are, call it how you please,
 In love with her—I don't except the priests
 Nor even the old confessor whose eyes run 870

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Over at what he styles his sister's voice
Who died so early and weaned him from the world.
Well, had they viewed her ere the paleness pushed
The last o' the red o' the rose away, while yet
Some hand, adventurous 'twixt the wind and her, 875
Might let shy life run back and raise the flower
Rich with reward up to the guardian's face,—
Would they have kept that hand employed all day
At fumbling on with prayer-book pages? No!
Men are men: why then need I say one word 880
More than that our mere man the Canon here
Saw, pitied, loved Pompilia?

This is why;

This startling why: that Caponsacchi's self—
Whom foes and friends alike avouch, for good 885
Or ill, a man of truth whate'er betide,
Intrepid altogether, reckless too
How his own fame and fortune, tossed to the winds,
Suffer by any turn the adventure take,
Nay, more—not thrusting, like a badge to hide, 890
'Twixt shirt and skin a joy which shown is shame—
But flirting flag-like i' the face o' the world
This tell-tale kerchief, this conspicuous love
For the lady,—oh, called innocent love, I know!
Only, such scarlet fiery innocence 895
As most folk would try muffle up in shade,—
—'T is strange then that this else abashless mouth
Should yet maintain, for truth's sake which is God's,
That it was not he made the first advance,
That, even ere word had passed between the two, 900
Pompilia penned him letters, passionate prayers,
If not love, then so simulating love
That he, no novice to the taste of thyme,
Turned from such over-luscious honey-clot
At end o' the flower, and would not lend his lip 905

Till . . . but the tale here frankly outsoars faith:
There must be falsehood somewhere. For her part,
Pompilia quietly constantly avers

She never penned a letter in her life

Nor to the Canon nor any other man,

Being incompetent to write and read :

Nor had she ever uttered word to him, nor he

To her till that same evening when they met,

She on her window-terrace, he beneath

I' the public street, as was their fateful chance,

And she adjured him in the name of God

To find out, bring to pass where, when and how

Escape with him to Rome might be contrived.

Means were found, plan laid, time fixed, she avers,

And heart assured to heart in loyalty,

All at an impulse ! All extemporized

As in romance-books ! Is that credible ?

Well, yes : as she avers this with calm mouth

Dying, I do think "Credible !" you 'd cry—

Did not the priest's voice come to break the spell. 925

They questioned him apart, as the custom is,

When first the matter made a noise at Rome,

And he, calm, constant then as she is now,

For truth's sake did assert and re-assert

Those letters called him to her and he came,

—Which damns the story credible otherwise.

Why should this man,—mad to devote himself,

Careless what comes of his own fame, the first,—

Be studious thus to publish and declare

Just what the lightest nature loves to hide,

So screening lady from the byword's laugh

"First spoke the lady, last the cavalier !"

—I say,—why should the man tell truth just now

When graceful lying meets such ready shrift ?

Or is there a first moment for a priest

As for a woman, when invaded shame

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BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Must have its first and last excuse to show ?
Do both contrive love's entry in the mind
Shall look, i' the manner of it, a surprise,—
That after, once the flag o' the fort hauled down, 945
Effrontery may sink drawbridge, open gate,
Welcome and entertain the conqueror ?

Or what do you say to a touch of the devil's worst ?
Can it be that the husband, he who wrote
The letter to his brother I told you of, 950
I' the name of her it meant to criminate,—
What if he wrote those letters to the priest ?
Further the priest says, when it first befell,
This folly o' the letters, that he checked the flow,
Put them back lightly each with its reply. 955

Here again vexes new discrepancy :
There never reached her eye a word from him :
He did write but she could not read—could just
Burn the offence to wifehood, womanhood,
So did burn : never bade him come to her, 960
Yet when it proved he must come, let him come,
And when he did come though uncalled,—why,
spoke

Prompt by an inspiration : thus it chanced.
Will you go somewhat back to understand ?

When first, pursuant to his plan, there sprang, 965
Like an uncaged beast, Guido's cruelty
On soul and body of his wife, she cried
To those whom law appoints resource for such,
The secular guardian,—that 's the Governor,
And the Archbishop,—that 's the spiritual guide, 970
And prayed them take the claws from out her flesh.
Now, this is ever the ill consequence
Of being noble, poor and difficult,
Ungainly, yet too great to disregard,—
This—that born peers and friends hereditary,— 975

Though disinclined to help from their own store
 The opprobrious wight, put penny in his poke
 From private purse or leave the door ajar
 When he goes wistful by at dinner-time,—

Yet, if his needs conduct him where they sit 980
 Smugly in office, judge this, bishop that,
 Dispensers of the shine and shade o' the place—
 And if, friend's door shut and friend's purse un-
 drawn,

Still potentates may find the office-seat
 Do as good service at no cost—give help 985
 By-the-bye, pay up traditional dues at once
 Just through a feather-weight too much i' the scale,
 Or finger-tip forgot at the balance-tongue,—
 Why, only churls refuse, or Molinists.

Thus when, in the first roughness of surprise 990
 At Guido's wolf-face whence the sheepskin fell,
 The frightened couple, all bewilderment,
 Rushed to the Governor,—who else rights wrong?
 Told him their tale of wrong and craved redress—
 Why, then the Governor woke up to the fact 995
 That Guido was a friend of old, poor Count!—
 So, promptly paid his tribute, promised the pair,
 Wholesome chastisement should soon cure their
 qualms

Next time they came, wept, prated and told lies :
 So stopped all prating, sent them dumb to Rome. 1000
 Well, now it was Pompilia's turn to try :
 The troubles pressing on her, as I said,
 Three times she rushed, maddened by misery,
 To the other mighty man, sobbed out her prayer
 At footstool of the Archbishop—fast the friend 1005
 Of her husband also ! Oh, good friends of yore !
 So, the Archbishop, not to be outdone
 By the Governor, break custom more than he,
 Thrice bade the foolish woman stop her tongue,

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Unloosed her hands from harassing his gout, 1010
Coached her and carried her to the Count again,
—His old friend should be master in his house,
Rule his wife and correct her faults at need !
Well, driven from post to pillar in this wise,
She, as a last resource, betook herself 1015
To one, should be no family-friend at least,
A simple friar o' the city ; confessed to him,
Then told how fierce temptation of release
By self-dealt death was busy with her soul,
And urged that he put this in words, write plain 1020
For one who could not write, set down her prayer
That Pietro and Violante, parent-like
If somehow not her parents, should for love
Come save her, pluck from out the flame the brand
Themselves had thoughtlessly thrust in so deep 1025
To send gay-coloured sparkles up and cheer
Their seat at the chimney-corner. The good friar
Promised as much at the moment ; but, alack,
Night brings discretion : he was no one's friend,
Yet presently found he could not turn about 1030
Nor take a step i' the case and fail to tread
On someone's toe who either was a friend,
Or a friend's friend, or friend's friend thrice-re-
moved,
And woe to friar by whom offences come !
So, the course being plain,—with a general sigh 1035
At matrimony the profound mistake,—
He threw reluctantly the business up,
Having his other penitents to mind.

If then, all outlets thus secured save one,
At last she took to the open, stood and stared
With her wan face to see where God might wait—
And there found Caponsacchi wait as well
For the precious something at perdition's edge, 1040

He only was predestinate to save,—
 And if they recognized in a critical flash 1045
 From the zenith, each the other, her need of him,
 His need of . . . say, a woman to perish for,
 The regular way o' the world, yet break no vow,
 Do no harm save to himself,—if this were thus?
 How do you say? It were improbable; 1050
 So is the legend of my patron-saint.

Anyhow, whether, as Guido states the case,
 Pompilia,—like a starving wretch i' the street
 Who stops and ruffles the first passenger
 In the great right of an excessive wrong,— 1055
 Did somehow call this stranger and he came,—
 Or whether the strange sudden interview
 Blazed as when star and star must needs go close
 Till each hurts each and there is loss in heaven—
 Whatever way in this strange world it was,— 1060
 Pompilia and Caponsacchi met, in fine,
 She at her window, he i' the street beneath,
 And understood each other at first look.

All was determined and performed at once.
 And on a certain April evening, late 1065
 I' the month, this girl of sixteen, bride and wife
 Three years and over,—she who hitherto
 Had never taken twenty steps in Rome
 Beyond the church, pinned to her mother's
 gown,
 Nor, in Arezzo, knew her way through street 1070
 Except what led to the Archbishop's door,—
 Such an one rose up in the dark, laid hand
 On what came first, clothes and a trinket or two,
 Belongings of her own in the old day,—
 Stole from the side o' the sleeping spouse—who
 knows?
 Sleeping perhaps, silent for certain,—slid 1075

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Ghost-like from great dark room to great dark room
In through the tapestries and out again
And onward, unembarrassed as a fate,
Descended staircase, gained last door of all, 1080
Sent it wide open at first push of palm,
And there stood, first time, last and only time,
At liberty, alone in the open street,—
Unquestioned, unmolested found herself
At the city gate, by Caponsacchi's side, 1085
Hope there, joy there, life and all good again,
The carriage there, the convoy there, light there
Broadening ever into blaze at Rome
And breaking small what long miles lay between;
Up she sprang, in he followed, they were safe. 1090

The husband quotes this for incredible,
All of the story from first word to last:
Sees the priest's hand throughout upholding hers,
Traces his foot to the alcove, that night,
Whither and whence blindfold he knew the way, 1095
Proficient in all craft and stealthiness;
And cites for proof a servant, eye that watched
And ear that opened to purse secrets up,
A woman-spy,—suborned to give and take
Letters and tokens, do the work of shame 1100
The more adroitly that herself, who helped
Communion thus between a tainted pair,
Had long since been a leper thick in spot,
A common trull o' the town: she witnessed all,
Helped many meetings, partings, took her wage 1105
And then told Guido the whole matter. Lies!
The woman's life confutes her word,—her word
Confutes itself: "Thus, thus and thus I lied."
"And thus, no question, still you lie," we say.
"Ay, but at last, e'en have it how you will, 1110
"Whatever the means, whatever the way, explodes

“The consummation”—the accusers shriek :
 “Here is the wife avowedly found in flight,
 “And the companion of her flight, a priest ;
 “She flies her husband, he the church his spouse : 1115
 “What is this ?”

Wife and priest alike reply

“This is the simple thing it claims to be,
 “A course we took for life and honour’s sake,
 “Very strange, very justifiable.” 1120

She says, “God put it in my head to fly,
 “As when the martin migrates : autumn claps
 “Her hands, cries ‘Winter’s coming, will be here,
 “‘Off with you ere the white teeth overtake !
 “‘Flee !’ So I fled: this friend was the warm day, 1125
 “The south wind and whatever favours flight ;
 “I took the favour, had the help, how else ?
 “And so we did fly rapidly all night,
 “All day, all night—a longer night—again,
 “And then another day, longest of days, 1130
 “And all the while, whether we fled or stopped,
 “I scarce know how or why, one thought filled both,
 “‘Fly and arrive !’ So long as I found strength
 “I talked with my companion, told him much,
 “Knowing that he knew more, knew me, knew God 1135
 “And God’s disposal of me,—but the sense
 “O’ the blessed flight absorbed me in the main,
 “And speech became mere talking through a sleep,
 “Till at the end of that last longest night
 “In a red daybreak, when we reached an inn 1140
 “And my companion whispered ‘Next stage—
 Rome !’

“Sudden the weak flesh fell like piled-up cards,
 “All the frail fabric at a finger’s touch,
 “And prostrate the poor soul too, and I said
 “‘But though Count Guido were a furlong off, 1145

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

“Just on me, I must stop and rest awhile !”
“Then something like a huge white wave o’ the sea
“Broke o’er my brain and buried me in sleep
“Blessedly, till it ebbed and left me loose,
“And where was I found but on a strange bed 1150
“In a strange room like hell, roaring with noise,
“Ruddy with flame, and filled with men, in front
“Who but the man you call my husband ? ay—
“Count Guido once more between heaven and me,
“For there my heaven stood, my salvation, yes— 1155
“That Caponsacchi all my heaven of help,
“Helpless himself, held prisoner in the hands
“Of men who looked up in my husband’s face
“To take the fate thence he should signify,
“Just as the way was at Arezzo. Then, 1160
“Not for my sake but his who had helped me—
“I sprang up, reached him with one bound, and
seized
“The sword o’ the felon, trembling at his side,
“Fit creature of a coward, unsheathed the thing
“And would have pinned him through the poison-
bag 1165
“To the wall and left him there to palpitate,
“As you serve scorpions, but men interposed—
“Disarmed me, gave his life to him again
“That he might take mine and the other lives,
“And he has done so. I submit myself !” 1170
The priest says—oh, and in the main result
The facts asseverate, he truly says,
As to the very act and deed of him,
However you mistrust the mind o’ the man—
The flight was just for flight’s sake, no pretext 1175
For aught except to set Pompilia free.
He says “I cite the husband’s self’s worst charge
“In proof of my best word for both of us.
“Be it conceded that so many times

“We took our pleasure in his palace : then, 1180
 “What need to fly at all?—or flying no less,
 “What need to outrage the lips sick and white
 “Of a woman, and bring ruin down beside,
 “By halting when Rome lay one stage beyond ?”
 So does he vindicate Pompilia’s fame, 1185
 Confirm her story in all points but one—
 This ; that, so fleeing and so breathing forth
 Her last strength in the prayer to halt awhile,
 She makes confusion of the reddening white
 Which was the sunset when her strength gave way, 1190
 And the next sunrise and its whitening red
 Which she revived in when her husband came :
 She mixes both times, morn and eve, in one,
 Having lived through a blank of night ’twixt each
 Though dead-asleep, unaware as a corpse, 1195
 She on the bed above ; her friend below
 Watched in the doorway of the inn the while,
 Stood i’ the red o’ the morn, that she mistakes,
 In act to rouse and quicken the tardy crew
 And hurry out the horses, have the stage 1200
 Over, the last league, reach Rome and be safe :
 When up came Guido.

Guido’s tale begins—

How he and his whole household, drunk to death
 By some enchanted potion, poppied drugs 1205
 Plied by the wife, lay powerless in gross sleep
 And left the spoilers unimpeded way,
 Could not shake off their poison and pursue,
 Till noontide, then made shift to get on horse
 And did pursue : which means he took his time, 1210
 Pressed on no more than lingered after, step
 By step, just making sure o’ the fugitives,
 Till at the nick of time, he saw his chance,
 Seized it, came up with and surprised the pair.

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

How he must needs have gnawn lip and gnashed teeth,

1215

Taking successively at tower and town,
Village and roadside, still the same report

“Yes, such a pair arrived an hour ago,

“Sat in the carriage just where now you stand,

“While we got horses ready,—turned deaf ear

1220

“To all entreaty they would even alight;

“Counted the minutes and resumed their course.”

Would they indeed escape, arrive at Rome,
Leave no least loop-hole to let murder through,

But foil him of his captured infamy,

1225

Prize of guilt proved and perfect? So it seemed.

Till, oh the happy chance, at last stage, Rome

But two short hours off, Castelnuovo reached,

The guardian angel gave reluctant place,

Satan stepped forward with alacrity,

1230

Pompilia’s flesh and blood succumbed, perforce
A halt was, and her husband had his will.

Perdue he couched, counted out hour by hour

Till he should spy in the east a signal-streak—

Night had been, morrow was, triumph would be.

1235

Do you see the plan deliciously complete?

The rush upon the unsuspecting sleep,

The easy execution, the outcry

Over the deed “Take notice all the world!

“These two dead bodies, locked still in embrace,—

1240

“The man is Caponsacchi and a priest,

“The woman is my wife: they fled me late,

“Thus have I found and you behold them thus,

“And may judge me: do you approve or no?”

Success did seem not so improbable,

1245

But that already Satan’s laugh was heard,

His black back turned on Guido—left i’ the lurch

Or rather, baulked of suit and service now,

Left to improve on both by one deed more,
 Burn up the better at no distant day,
 Body and soul one holocaust to hell.

1250

Anyhow, of this natural consequence
 Did just the last link of the long chain snap :
 For an eruption was o' the priest, alive
 And alert, calm, resolute and formidable,

1255

Not the least look of fear in that broad brow—
 One not to be disposed of by surprise,

And armed moreover—who had guessed as much ?
 Yes, there stood he in secular costume

Complete from head to heel, with sword at side, 1260
 He seemed to know the trick of perfectly.

There was no prompt suppression of the man
 As he said calmly “ I have saved your wife

“ From death ; there was no other way but this ;
 “ Of what do I defraud you except death ?

1265

“ Charge any wrong beyond, I answer it.”
 Guido, the valorous, had met his match,

Was forced to demand help instead of fight,
 Bid the authorities o' the place lend aid

And make the best of a broken matter so.

1270

They soon obeyed the summons—I suppose,
 Apprised and ready, or not far to seek—

Laid hands on Caponsacchi, found in fault,
 A priest yet flagrantly accoutréed thus,—

Then, to make good Count Guido's further charge, 1275
 Proceeded, prisoner made lead the way,

In a crowd, upstairs to the chamber-door
 Where wax-white, dead asleep, deep beyond

dream,

As the priest laid her, lay Pompilia yet.

And as he mounted step and step with the crowd 1280
 How I see Guido taking heart again !

He knew his wife so well and the way of her—

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

How at the outbreak she would shroud her shame
In hell's heart, would it mercifully yawn—
How, failing that, her forehead to his foot,
She would crouch silent till the great doom fell,
Leave him triumphant with the crowd to see
Guilt motionless or writhing like a worm !

No ! Second misadventure, this worm turned,
I told you : would have slain him on the spot
With his own weapon, but they seized her hands :

Leaving her tongue free, as it tolled the knell
Of Guido's hope so lively late. The past
Took quite another shape now. She who shrieked

"At least and for ever I am mine and God's,"
"Thanks to his liberating angel Death—
"Never again degraded to be yours

"The ignoble noble, the unmanly man,
"The beast below the beast in brutishness!"—
This was the froward child, "the restif lamb

"Used to be cherished in his breast," he groaned—
"Eat from his hand and drink from out his
cup,

"The while his fingers pushed their loving way
"Through curl on curl of that soft coat—alas,

"And she all silverly baaed gratitude
"While meditating mischief!"—and so forth.

He must invent another story now !
The ins and outs o' the rooms were searched : he

found

Or showed for found the abominable prize—
Love-letters from his wife who cannot write,
Love-letters in reply o' the priest—thank God !—

Who can write and confront his character
With this, and provethe false thing forged through-
out :

Spitting whereat, he needs must spatter whom
But Guido's self?—that forged and falsified

1285

1290

1295

1300

1305

1310

1315

One letter called Pompilia's, past dispute :
Then why not these to make sure still more sure ?

So was the case concluded then and there :
Guido preferred his charges in due form,
Called on the law to adjudicate, consigned 1320
The accused ones to the Prefect of the place,
(Oh mouse-birth of that mountain-like revenge !)
And so to his own place betook himself
After the spring that failed,—the wildcat's way.
The captured parties were conveyed to Rome ; 1325
Investigation followed here i' the court—
Soon to review the fruit of its own work,
From then to now being eight months and no more.
Guido kept out of sight and safe at home :
The Abate, brother Paolo, helped most 1330
At words when deeds were out of question, pushed
Nearest the purple, best played deputy,
So, pleaded, Guido's representative
At the court shall soon try Guido's self,—what 's
more,
The court that also took—I told you, Sir— 1335
That statement of the couple, how a cheat
Had been i' the birth of the babe, no child of theirs.
That was the prelude ; this, the play's first act :
Whereof we wait what comes, crown, close of all.

Well, the result was something of a shade 1340
On the parties thus accused,—how otherwise ?
Shade, but with shine as unmistakable.
Each had a prompt defence : Pompilia first—
“Earth was made hell to me who did no harm :
“I only could emerge one way from hell 1345
“By catching at the one hand held me, so
“I caught at it and thereby stepped to heaven :
“If that be wrong, do with me what you will !”
Then Caponsacchi with a grave grand sweep

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

O' the arm as though his soul warned baseness off— 1350
" If as a man, then much more as a priest
" I hold me bound to help weak innocence :
" If so my worldly reputation burst,
" Being the bubble it is, why, burst it may :
" Blame I can bear though not blameworthiness. 1355
" But use your sense first, see if the miscreant
 proved,
" The man who tortured thus the woman, thus
" Have not both laid the trap and fixed the lure
" Over the pit should bury body and soul !
" His facts are lies : his letters are the fact— 1360
" An infiltration flavoured with himself !
" As for the fancies—whether . . . what is it you
 say ?
" The lady loves me, whether I love her
" In the forbidden sense of your surmise,—
" If, with the midday blaze of truth above, 1365
" The unlidded eye of God awake, aware,
" You needs must pry about and trace the birth
" Of each stray beam of light may traverse night
" To the night's sun that 's Lucifer himself,
" Do so, at other time, in other place, 1370
" Not now nor here ! Enough that first to last
" I never touched her lip nor she my hand
" Nor either of us thought a thought, much less
" Spoke a word which the Virgin might not hear.
" Be such your question, thus I answer it." 1375

Then the court had to make its mind up, spoke.

" It is a thorny question, yea, a tale
" Hard to believe, but not impossible :
" Who can be absolute for either side ?
" A middle course is happily open yet. 1380
" Here has a blot surprised the social blank,—
" Whether through favour, feebleness or fault,

“ No matter, leprosy has touched our robe
 “ And we unclean must needs be purified.
 “ Here is a wife makes holiday from home, 1385
 “ A priest caught playing truant to his church,
 “ In masquerade moreover : both allege
 “ Enough excuse to stop our lifted scourge
 “ Which else would heavily fall. On the other
 hand,

“ Here is a husband, ay and man of mark, 1390
 “ Who comes complaining here, demands redress
 “ As if he were the pattern of desert—
 “ The while those plaguy allegations frown,
 “ Forbid we grant him the redress he seeks.
 “ To all men be our moderation known ! 1395
 “ Rewarding none while compensating each,
 “ Hurting all round though harming nobody,
 “ Husband, wife, priest, scot-free not one shall
 'scape,

“ Yet priest, wife, husband, boast the unbroken head
 “ From application of our excellent oil : 1400
 “ So that, whatever be the fact, in fine,
 “ We make no miss of justice in a sort.
 “ First, let the husband stomach as he may,
 “ His wife shall neither be returned him, no—
 “ Nor branded, whipped and caged, but just con-
 signed 1405

“ To a convent and the quietude she craves ;
 “ So is he rid of his domestic plague :
 “ What better thing can happen to a man ?
 “ Next, let the priest retire—unshent, unshamed,
 “ Unpunished as for perpetrating crime, 1410
 “ But relegated (not imprisoned, Sirs !)
 “ Sent for three years to clarify his youth
 “ At Civita, a rest by the way to Rome :
 “ There let his life skim off its last of lees
 “ Nor keep this dubious colour. Judged the cause : 1415

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

“All parties may retire, content, we hope.”
 That’s Rome’s way, the traditional road of law ;
 Whither it leads is what remains to tell.

The priest went to his relegation-place,
 The wife to her convent, brother Paolo 1420
 To the arms of brother Guido with the news
 And this beside—his charge was countercharged ;
 The Comparini, his old brace of hates,
 Were breathed and vigilant and venomous now—
 Had shot a second bolt where the first stuck, 1425
 And followed up the pending dowry-suit
 By a procedure should release the wife
 From so much of the marriage-bond as barred
 Escape when Guido turned the screw too much
 On his wife’s flesh and blood, as husband may. 1430
 No more defence, she turned and made attack,
 Claimed now divorce from bed and board, in short :
 Pleaded such subtle strokes of cruelty,
 Such slow sure siege laid to her body and soul,
 As, proved,—and proofs seemed coming thick and 1435
 fast,—
 Would gain both freedom and the dowry back
 Even should the first suit leave them in his grasp :
 So urged the Comparini for the wife.
 Guido had gained not one of the good things
 He grasped at by his creditable plan 1440
 O’ the flight and following and the rest : the suit
 That smouldered late was fanned to fury new,
 This adjunct came to help with fiercer fire,
 While he had got himself a quite new plague—
 Found the world’s face an universal grin 1445
 At this last best of the Hundred Merry Tales
 Of how a young and spritely clerk devised
 To carry off a spouse that moped too much,
 And cured her of the vapours in a trice :

And how the husband, playing Vulcan's part, 1450
 Told by the Sun, started in hot pursuit
 To catch the lovers, and came halting up,
 Cast his net and then called the Gods to see
 The convicts in their rosy impudence—
 Whereat said Mercury “Would that I were Mars !” 1455
 Oh it was rare, and naughty all the same !
 Brief, the wife's courage and cunning,—the priest's
 show
 Of chivalry and adroitness,—last not least,
 The husband—how he ne'er showed teeth at all,
 Whose bark had promised biting; but just sneaked 1460
 Back to his kennel, tail 'twixt legs, as 't were,—
 All this was hard to gulp down and digest.
 So pays the devil his liegeman, brass for gold.
 But this was at Arezzo : here in Rome
 Brave Paolo bore up against it all— 1465
 Battled it out, nor wanting to himself
 Nor Guido nor the House whose weight he bore
 Pillar-like, by no force of arm but brain.
 He knew his Rome, what wheels to set to work ;
 Plied influential folk, pressed to the ear 1470
 Of the efficacious purple, pushed his way
 To the old Pope's self,—past decency indeed,—
 Praying him take the matter in his hands
 Out of the regular court's incompetence.
 But times are changed and nephews out of date 1475
 And favouritism unfashionable : the Pope
 Said “ Render Cæsar what is Cæsar's due ! ”
 As for the Comparini's counter-plea,
 He met that by a counter-plea again,
 Made Guido claim divorce—with help so far 1480
 By the trial's issue : for, why punishment
 However slight unless for guiltiness
 However slender?—and a molehill serves
 Much as a mountain of offence this way.

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

So was he gathering strength on every side
And growing more and more to menace—when 1485
All of a terrible moment came the blow
That beat down Paolo's fence, ended the play
O' the foil and brought mannaia on the stage.

Five monthshad passed nowsince Pompilia's flight, 1490
Months spent in peace among the Convert nuns.
This,—being, as it seemed, for Guido's sake
Solely, what pride might call imprisonment
And quote as something gained, to friends at
home,—

This naturally was at Guido's charge : 1495
Grudge it he might, but penitential fare,
Prayers, preachings, who but he defrayed the cost?
So, Paolo dropped, as proxy, doit by doit
Like heart's blood, till—what's here? What
notice comes?

The convent's self makes application bland 1500
That, since Pompilia's health is fast o' the wane,
She may have leave to go combine her cure
Of soul with cure of body, mend her mind
Together with her thin arms and sunk eyes
That want fresh air outside the convent-wall, 1505
Say in a friendly house,—and which so fit
As a certain villa in the Pauline way,
That happens to hold Pietro and his wife,
The natural guardians? “Oh, and shift the care
“You shift the cost, too; Pietro pays in turn, 1510
“And lightens Guido of a load! And then,
“Villa or convent, two names for one thing,
“Always the sojourn means imprisonment,
“*Domus pro carcere*—nowise we relax,
“Nothing abate: how answers Paolo?” 1515

You,
What would you answer? All so smooth and fair,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK III

Even Paul's astuteness sniffed no harm i' the world.
 He authorized the transfer, saw it made
 And, two months after, reaped the fruit of the same, 1520
 Having to sit down, rack his brain and find
 What phrase should serve him best to notify
 Our Guido that by happy providence
 A son and heir, a babe was born to him
 I' the villa,—go tell sympathizing friends ! 1525
 Yes, such had been Pompilia's privilege :
 She, when she fled, was one month gone with child,
 Known to herself or unknown, either way
 Availing to explain (say men of art)
 The strange and passionate precipitance 1530
 Of maiden startled into motherhood
 Which changes body and soul by nature's law.
 So when the she-dove breeds, strange yearnings
 come
 For the unknown shelter by undreamed-of shores,
 And there is born a blood-pulse in her heart 1535
 To fight if needs be, though with flap of wing,
 For the wool-flock or the fur-tuft, though a hawk
 Contest the prize,—wherefore, she knows not yet.
 Anyhow, thus to Guido came the news.
 "I shall have quitted Rome ere you arrive 1540
 "To take the one step left,"—wrote Paolo.
 Then did the winch o' the winepress of all hate,
 Vanity, disappointment, grudge and greed,
 Take the last turn that screws out pure revenge
 With a bright bubble at the brim beside— 1545
 By an heir's birth he was assured at once
 O' the main prize, all the money in dispute :
 Pompilia's dowry might revert to her
 Or stay with him as law's caprice should point,—
 But now—now—what was Pietro's shall be hers, 1550
 What was hers shall remain her own,—if hers,
 Why then,—oh, not her husband's but—her heir's !

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

That heir being his too, all grew his at last
By this road or by that road, since they join.
Before, why, push he Pietro out o' the world,— 1555
The current of the money stopped, you see,
Pompilia being proved no Pietro's child :
Or let it be Pompilia's life he quenched,
Again the current of the money stopped,—
Guido debarred his rights as husband soon, 1560
So the new process threatened ;—now, the chance,
Now, the resplendent minute ! Clear the earth,
Cleanse the house, let the three but disappear
A child remains, depositary of all,
That Guido may enjoy his own again, 1565
Repair all losses by a master-stroke,
Wipe out the past, all done all left undone,
Swell the good present to best evermore,
Die into new life, which let blood baptize !

So, i' the blue of a sudden sulphur-blaze, 1570
Both why there was one step to take at Rome,
And why he should not meet with Paolo there,
He saw—the ins and outs to the heart of hell—
And took the straight line thither swift and sure.
He rushed to Vittiano, found four sons o' the soil, 1575
Brutes of his breeding, with one spark i' the clod
That served for a soul, the looking up to him
Or aught called Franceschini as life, death,
Heaven, hell,—lord paramount, assembled these,
Harangued, equipped, instructed, pressed each 1580
clod
With his will's imprint; then took horse, plied spur,
And so arrived, all five of them, at Rome
On Christmas-Eve, and forthwith found them-
selves
Installed i' the vacancy and solitude
Left them by Paolo, the considerate man 1585

Who, good as his word, had disappeared at once
 As if to leave the stage free. A whole week
 Did Guido spend in study of his part,
 Then played it fearless of a failure. One,
 Struck the year's clock whereof the hours are
 days,

1590

And off was rung o' the little wheels the chime
 "Good will on earth and peace to man": but, two,
 Proceeded the same bell and, evening come,
 The dreadful five felt finger-wise their way
 Across the town by blind cuts and black turns
 To the little lone suburban villa; knocked—
 "Who maybe outside?" called a well-known voice.
 "A friend of Caponsacchi's bringing friends
 "A letter."

1595

That's a test, the excusers say:

Ay, and a test conclusive, I return.

1600

What? Had that name brought touch of guilt or
 taste

Of fear with it, aught to dash the present joy
 With memory of the sorrow just at end,—
 She, happy in her parents' arms at length
 With the new blessing of the two weeks' babe,—
 How had that name's announcement moved the
 wife?

1605

Or, as the other slanders circulate,
 Were Caponsacchi no rare visitant
 On nights and days whither safe harbour lured,
 What bait had been i' the name to ope the door?
 The promise of a letter? Stealthy guests
 Have secret watchwords, private entrances:
 The man's own self might have been found inside
 And all the scheme made frustrate by a word.
 No: but since Guido knew, none knew so well,
 The man had never since returned to Rome
 Nor seen the wife's face more than villa's front,

1610

1615

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

So, could not be at hand to warn or save,—
For that, he took this sure way to the end.

“Come in,” bade poor Violante cheerfully, 1620
Drawing the door-bolt: that death was the first,
Stabbed through and through. Pietro, close on
her heels,

Set up a cry—“Let me confess myself!

“Grant but confession!” Cold steel was the grant.
Then came Pompilia’s turn. 1625

Then they escaped.
The noise o’ the slaughter roused the neighbour-
hood.

They had forgotten just the one thing more
Which saves i’ the circumstance, the ticket to-wit
Which puts post-horses at a traveller’s use: 1630
So, all on foot, desperate through the dark
Reeled they like drunks along open road,
Accomplished a prodigious twenty miles
Homeward, and gained Baccano very near,
Stumbled at last, deaf, dumb, blind through the
feat, 1635

Into a grange and, one dead heap, slept there
Till the pursuers hard upon their trace
Reached them and took them, red from head to
heel,
And brought them to the prison where they lie.
The couple were laid i’ the church two days ago, 1640
And the wife lives yet by miracle.

All is told.
You hardly need ask what Count Guido says,
Since something he must say. “I own the deed—”
(He cannot choose,—but—) “I declare the same 1645
“Just and inevitable,—since no way else
“Was left me, but by this of taking life,
“To save my honour which is more than life.

“I exercised a husband’s rights.” To which
 The answer is as prompt—“There was no fault 1650
 “In any one o’ the three to punish thus :
 “Neither i’ the wife, who kept all faith to you,
 “Nor in the parents, whom yourself first duped,
 “Robbed and maltreated, then turned out of doors.
 “You wronged and they endured wrong ; yours
 the fault. 1655

“Next, had endurance overpassed the mark
 “And turned resentment needing remedy,—
 “Nay, put the absurd impossible case, for once—
 “You were all blameless of the blame alleged
 “And they blameworthy where you fix all blame, 1660
 “Still, why this violation of the law ?
 “Yourself elected law should take its course,
 “Avenge wrong, or show vengeance not your
 right ;
 “Why, only when the balance in law’s hand
 “Trembles against you and inclines the way 1665
 “O’ the other party, do you make protest,
 “Renounce arbitrament, flying out of court,
 “And crying ‘Honour’s hurt the sword must cure’?
 “Aha, and so i’ the middle of each suit
 “Trying i’ the courts,—and you had three in play 1670
 “With an appeal to the Pope’s self beside,—
 “What, you may chop and change and right your
 wrongs
 “Leaving the law to lag as she thinks fit ?”

That were too temptingly commodious, Count !
 One would have still a remedy in reserve 1675
 Should reach the safest oldest sinner, you see !
 One’s honour forsooth ? Does that take hurt alone
 From the extreme outrage ? I who have no wife,
 Being yet sensitive in my degree
 As Guido,—must discover hurt elsewhere 1680

BOOK III THE OTHER HALF-ROME

Which, half compounded-for in days gone by,
May profitably break out now afresh,
Need cure from my own expeditious hands.

The lie that was, as it were, imputed me
When you objected to my contract's clause,—
The theft as good as, one may say, alleged,
When you, co-heir in a will, excepted, Sir,
To my administration of effects,

—Aha, do you think law disposed of these ?
My honour's touched and shall deal death around ! 1685
Count, that were too commodious, I repeat !
If any law be imperative on us all,
Of all are you the enemy : out with you
From the common light and air and life of man !

IV.—TERTIUM QUID

TRUE, Excellency—as his Highness says,
Though she 's not dead yet, she 's as good as
stretched

Symmetrical beside the other two ;
Though he 's not judged yet, he 's the same as
judged,

So do the facts abound and superabound : 5

And nothing hinders that we lift the case

Out of the shade into the shine, allow

Qualified persons to pronounce at last,

Nay, edge in an authoritative word

Between this rabble's-brabble of dolts and fools 10

Who make up reasonless unreasoning Rome.

“Now for the Trial !” they roar : “the Trial to
test

“The truth, weigh husband and weigh wife alike

“I’ the scales of law, make one scale kick the
beam !”

Law 's a machine from which, to please the mob, 15

Truth the divinity must needs descend

And clear things at the play's fifth act—aha !

Hammer into their noddles who was who

And what was what. I tell the simpletons

“Could law be competent to such a feat

“T were done already : what begins next week

“Is end o' the Trial, last link of a chain

“Whereof the first was forged three years ago

“When law addressed herself to set wrong right,

“And proved so slow in taking the first step 25

“That ever some new grievance,—tort, retort,
 “On one or the other side,—o’ertook i’ the game,
 “Retarded sentence, till this deed of death
 “Is thrown in, as it were, last bale to boat
 “Crammed to the edge with cargo—or passengers? 30
 “‘*Trecentos inseris: ohe, jam satis est!*’
 “‘*Huc appelle!*’—passengers, the word must be.”
 Long since, the boat was loaded to my eyes.
 To hear the rabble and brabble, you’d call the
 case
 Fused and confused past human finding out. 35
 One calls the square round, t’ other the round
 square—
 And pardonably in that first surprise
 O’ the blood that fell and splashed the diagram :
 But now we’ve used our eyes to the violent hue
 Can’t we look through the crimson and trace lines? 40
 It makes a man despair of history,
 Eusebius and the established fact—fig’s end !
 Oh, give the fools their Trial, rattle away
 With the leash of lawyers, two on either side—
 One barks, one bites,—Masters Arcangeli 45
 And Spreti,—that’s the husband’s ultimate hope
 Against the Fisc and the other kind of Fisc,
 Bound to do barking for the wife : bow-wow !
 Why, Excellency, we and his Highness here
 Would settle the matter as sufficiently 50
 As ever will Advocate This and Fiscal That
 And Judge the Other, with even—a word and a
 wink—
 We well know who for ultimate arbiter.
 Let us beware o’ the basset-table—lest
 We jog the elbow of Her Eminence,
 Jostle his cards,—he’ll rap you out a . . . st ! 55
 By the window-seat ! And here’s the Marquis too !
 Indulge me but a moment : if I fail

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

—Favoured with such an audience, understand!—
To set things right, why, class me with the mob 60
As understander of the mind of man!

The mob,—now, that's just how the error comes!
Bethink you that you have to deal with *plebs*,
The commonalty; this is an episode
In burgess-life,—why seek to aggrandize, 65
Idealize, denaturalize the class?

People talk just as if they had to do
With a noble pair that . . . Excellency, your ear!
Stoop to me, Highness,—listen and look your-
selves!

This Pietro, this Violante, live their life 70
At Rome in the easy way that's far from worst
Even for their betters,—themselves love them-
selves,

Spend their own oil in feeding their own lamp
That their own faces may grow bright thereby.
They get to fifty and over: how's the lamp? 75
Full to the depth o' the wick,—moneys so much;
And also with a remnant,—so much more
Of moneys,—which there's no consuming now,
But, when the wick shall moulder out some day,
Failing fresh twist of tow to use up dregs, 80
Will lie a prize for the passer-by,—to-wit
Anyone that can prove himself the heir,
Seeing, the couple are wanting in a child:
Meantime their wick swims in the safe broad bowl
O' the middle rank,—not raised a beacon's height 85
For wind to ravage, nor dropped till lamp graze
ground

Like cresset, mudlarks poke now here now there,
Going their rounds to probe the ruts i' the road
Or fish the luck o' the puddle. Pietro's soul
Was satisfied when cronies smirked, "No wine 90

“Like Pietro’s, and he drinks it every day !”
 His wife’s heart swelled her boddice, joyed its fill
 When neighbours turned heads wistfully at church,
 Sighed at the load of lace that came to pray.
 Well, having got through fifty years of flare, 95
 They burn out so, indulge so their dear selves,
 That Pietro finds himself in debt at last,
 As he were any lordling of us all :
 And, now that dark begins to creep on day,
 Creditors grow uneasy, talk aside, 100
 Take counsel, then importune all at once.
 For if the good fat rosy careless man,
 Who has not laid a ducat by, decease—
 Let the lamp fall, no heir at hand to catch—
 Why, being childless, there’s a spilth i’ the street 105
 O’ the remnant, there’s a scramble for the dregs
 By the stranger : so, they grant him no long day
 But come in a body, clamour to be paid.

What’s his resource? He asks and straight obtains
 The customary largess, dole dealt out 110
 To, what we call our “poor dear shame-faced ones,”
 In secret once a month to spare the shame
 O’ the slothful and the spendthrift,—pauper-saints
 The Pope puts meat i’ the mouth of, ravens they,
 And providence he—just what the mob admires ! 115
 That is, instead of putting a prompt foot
 On selfish worthless human slugs whose slime
 Has failed to lubricate their path in life,
 Why, the Pope picks the first ripe fruit that falls
 And gracious puts it in the vermin’s way. 120
 Pietro could never save a dollar? Straight
 He must be subsidized at our expense :
 And for his wife—the harmless household sheep
 One ought not to see harassed in her age—
 Judge, by the way she bore adversity, 125

O' the patient nature you ask pity for !
 How long, now, would the roughest marketman,
 Handling the creatures huddled to the knife,
 Harass a mutton ere she made a mouth
 Or menaced biting ? Yet the poor sheep here, 130
 Violante, the old innocent burgess-wife,
 In her first difficulty showed great teeth
 Fit to crunch up and swallow a good round crime.
 She meditates the tenure of the Trust,
Fidei commissum is the lawyer-phrase, 135
 These funds that only want an heir to take—
 Goes o'er the gamut o' the creditor's cry
 By semitones from whine to snarl high up
 And growl down low, one scale in sundry keys,—
 Pauses with a little compunction for the face 140
 Of Pietro frustrate of its ancient cheer,—
 Never a bottle now for friend at need,—
 Comes to a stop on her own frittered lace
 And neighbourly condolences thereat,
 Then makes her mind up, sees the thing to do : 145
 And so, deliberate, snaps house-book clasp,
 Posts off to vespers, missal beneath arm,
 Passes the proper San Lorenzo by,
 Dives down a little lane to the left, is lost
 In a labyrinth of dwellings best unnamed, 150
 Selects a certain blind one, black at base,
 Blinking at top,—the sign of we know what,—
 One candle in a casement set to wink
 Streetward, do service to no shrine inside,—
 Mounts thither by the filthy flight of stairs, 155
 Holding the cord by the wall, to the tip-top,
 Gropes for the door i' the dark, ajar of course,
 Raps, opens, enters in : up starts a thing
 Naked as needs be—“What, you rogue, 't is you ?
 “Back,—how can I have taken a farthing yet ? 160
 “Mercy on me, poor sinner that I am !

“Here’s . . . why, I took you for Madonna’s self
 “With all that sudden swirl of silk i’ the place !
 “What may your pleasure be, my bonny dame ?”
 Your Excellency supplies aught left obscure ?

165

One of those women that abound in Rome,
 Whose needs oblige them eke out one poor trade
 By another vile one : her ostensible work
 Was washing clothes, out in the open air
 At the cistern by Citorio ; her true trade—
 Whispering to idlers, when they stopped and
 praised

170

The ankles she let liberally shine
 In kneeling at the slab by the fountain-side,
 That there was plenty more to criticize
 At home, that eve, i’ the house where candle
 blinked

175

Decorously above, and all was done
 I’ the holy fear of God and cheap beside.
 Violante, now, had seen this woman wash,
 Noticed and envied her propitious shape,
 Tracked her home to her house-top, noted too,
 And now was come to tempt her and propose
 A bargain far more shameful than the first
 Which trafficked her virginity away

180

For a melon and three pauls at twelve years old.
 Five minutes’ talk with this poor child of Eve,
 Struck was the bargain, business at an end—
 “Then, six months hence, that person whom you
 trust,

185

“Comes, fetches whatsoever babe it be ;
 “I keep the price and secret, you the babe,
 “Paying beside for mass to make all straight :
 “Meantime, I pouch the earnest-money-piece.”

190

Down stairs again goes fumbling by the rope
 Violante, triumphing in a flourish of fire

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

From her own brain, self-lit by such success,—
 Gains church in time for the “*Magnificat*” 195
 And gives forth “My reproof is taken away,
 “And blessed shall mankind proclaim me now,”
 So that the officiating priest turns round
 To see who proffers the obstreperous praise :
 Then home to Pietro, the enraptured-much 200
 But puzzled-more when told the wondrous news—
 How orisons and works of charity,
 (Beside that pair of pinners and a coif,
 Birth-day surprise last Wednesday was five weeks)
 Had borne fruit in the autumn of his life,— 205
 They, or the Orvieto in a double dose.
 Anyhow, she must keep house next six months,
 Lie on the settle, avoid the three-legged stool,
 And, chiefly, not be crossed in wish or whim,
 And the result was like to be an heir. 210

Accordingly, when time was come about,
 He found himself the sire indeed of this
 Francesca Vittoria Pompilia and the rest
 O’ the names whereby he sealed her his, next
 day.

A crime complete in its way is here, I hope ? 215
 Lies to God, lies to man, every way lies
 To nature and civility and the mode :
 Flat robbery of the proper heirs thus foiled
 O’ the due succession,—and, what followed thence,
 Robbery of God, through the confessor’s ear 220
 Debarred the most note-worthy incident
 When all else done and undone twelve-month
 through
 Was put in evidence at Easter-time.
 All other peccadillos !—but this one
 To the priest who comes next day to dine with us ? 225
 ‘T were inexpedient ; decency forbade.

Is so far clear? You know Violante now,
 Compute her capability of crime
 By this authentic instance? Black hard cold
 Crime like a stone you kick up with your foot
 I' the middle of a field?

230

I thought as much.
 But now, a question,—how long does it lie,
 The bad and barren bit of stuff you kick,
 Before encroached on and encompassed round
 With minute moss, weed, wild-flower—made alive
 By worm, and fly, and foot of the free bird?

235

Your Highness,—healthy minds let bygones be,
 Leave old crimes to grow young and virtuous-like
 I' the sun and air; so time treats ugly deeds:
 They take the natural blessing of all change.
 There was the joy o' the husband silly-sooth,
 The softening of the wife's old wicked heart,
 Virtues to right and left, profusely paid
 If so they might compensate the saved sin.

240

And then the sudden existence, dewy-dear,
 O' the rose above the dungheap, the pure child
 As good as new created, since withdrawn
 From the horror of the pre-appointed lot
 With the unknown father and the mother known
 Too well,—some fourteen years of squalid youth,
 And then libertinage, disease, the grave—
 Hell in life here, hereafter life in hell:
 Look at that horror and this soft repose!

245

Why, moralist, the sin has saved a soul!
 Then, even the palpable grievance to the heirs—
 'Faith, this was no frank setting hand to throat
 And robbing a man, but . . . Excellency, by your
 leave,
 How did you get that marvel of a gem,
 That sapphire with the Graces grand and Greek?

250

255

260

The story is, stooping to pick a stone
 From the pathway through a vineyard—no-man's-
 land—

To pelt a sparrow with, you chanced on this :
 Why now, do those five clowns o' the family
 O' the vinedresser digest their porridge worse 265
 That not one keeps it in his goatskin pouch
 To do flint's-service with the tinder-box ?
 Don't cheat me, don't cheat you, don't cheat a
 friend,

But are you so hard on who jostles just
 A stranger with no natural sort of claim 270
 To the havings and the holdings (here 's the point)
 Unless by misadventure, and defect
 Of that which ought to be—nay, which there 's
 none

Would dare so much as wish to profit by—
 Since who dares put in just so many words 275
 " May Pietro fail to have a child, please God !
 " So shall his house and goods belong to me,
 " The sooner that his heart will pine betimes " ?
 Well then, God doesn't please, nor heart shall pine !
 Because he has a child at last, you see, 280
 Or selfsame thing as though a child it were,
 He thinks, whose sole concern it is to think :
 If he accepts it why should you demur ?

Moreover, say that certain sin there seem,
 The proper process of unsinning sin 285
 Is to begin well-doing somehow else.
 Pietro,—remember, with no sin at all
 I' the substitution,—why, this gift of God
 Flung in his lap from over Paradise
 Steadied him in a moment, set him straight
 On the good path he had been straying from. 290
 Henceforward no more wilfulness and waste,

Cuppings, carousings,—these a sponge wiped out.
 All sort of self-denial was easy now
 For the child's sake, the chatelaine to be,
 Who must want much and might want who knows
 what?

295

And so, the debts were paid, habits reformed,
 Expense curtailed, the dowry set to grow.
 As for the wife,—I said, hers the whole sin :
 So, hers the exemplary penance. 'T was a text
 Whereon folk preached and praised, the district
 through :

“Oh, make us happy and you make us good !
 “It all comes of God giving her a child :
 “Such graces follow God's best earthly gift !”

Here you put by my guard, pass to my heart
 By the home-thrust—“There's a lie at base of all.”
 Why, thou exact Prince, is it a pearl or no,
 Yon globe upon the Principessa's neck ?
 That great round glory of pellucid stuff,
 A fish secreted round a grain of grit !
 Do you call it worthless for the worthless core ?
 (She doesn't, who well knows what she changed
 for it.)

305

310

So, to our brace of burgesses again !
 You see so far i' the story, who was right,
 Who wrong, who neither, don't you ? What, you
 don't ?

315

Eh? Well, admit there's somewhat dark i' the case,
 Let 's on—the rest shall clear, I promise you.
 Leap over a dozen years : you find, these past,
 An old good easy creditable sire,
 A careful housewife's beaming bustling face,
 Both wrapped up in the love of their one child,
 The strange tall pale beautiful creature grown
 Lily-like out o' the cleft i' the sun-smit rock

320

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

To bow its white miraculous birth of buds
 I' the way of wandering Joseph and his spouse,— 325
 So painters fancy : here it was a fact.

And this their lily,—could they but transplant
 And set in vase to stand by Solomon's porch
 'Twixt lion and lion !—this *Pompilia* of theirs,
 Could they see worthily married, well bestowed, 330
 In house and home ! And why despair of this
 With Rome to choose from, save the topmost rank?
 Themselves would help the choice with heart and
 soul,

Throw their late savings in a common heap
 To go with the dowry, and be followed in time 335
 By the heritage legitimately hers :
 And when such paragon was found and fixed,
 Why, they might chant their "*Nunc dimittis*"
 straight.

Indeed the prize was simply full to a fault,
 Exorbitant for the suitor they should seek,
 And social class should choose among, these cits. 340
 Yet there 's a latitude : exceptional white
 Amid the general brown o' the species, lurks
 A burgess nearly an aristocrat,
 Legitimately in reach : look out for him ! 345
 What banker, merchant, has seen better days,
 What second-rate painter a-pushing up,
 Poet a-slipping down, shall bid the best
 For this young beauty with the thumping purse ?
 Alack, were it but one of such as these
 So like the real thing that they pass for it, 350
 All had gone well ! Unluckily, poor souls,
 It proved to be the impossible thing itself,
 Truth and not sham : hence ruin to them all.

For, Guido Franceschini was the head
 Of an old family in Arezzo, old 355

To that degree they could afford be poor
 Better than most : the case is common too.
 Out of the vast door 'scutcheoned overhead,
 Creeps out a serving-man on Saturdays 360
 To cater for the week,—turns up anon
 I' the market, chaffering for the lamb's least leg,
 Or the quarter-fowl, less entrails, claws and comb :
 Then back again with prize,—a liver begged
 Into the bargain, gizzard overlooked. 365

He 's mincing these to give the beans a taste,
 When, at your knock, he leaves the simmering soup,
 Waits on the curious stranger-visitant,
 Napkin in half-wiped hand, to show the rooms,
 Point pictures out have hung their hundred years, 370
 "Priceless," he tells you,—puts in his place at once
 The man of money : yes, you 're banker-king
 Or merchant-kaiser, wallow in your wealth
 While patron, the house-master, can't afford
 To stop our ceiling-hole that rain so rots : 375
 But he 's the man of mark, and there 's his shield,
 And yonder 's the famed Rafael, first in kind,
 The painter painted for his grandfather,
 And you have paid to see: "Good morning, Sir!"
 Such is the law of compensation. Still 380

The poverty was getting nigh acute ;
 There gaped so many noble mouths to feed,
 Beans must suffice unflavoured of the fowl.
 The mother,—hers would be a spun-out life
 I' the nature of things ; the sisters had done well 385
 And married men of reasonable rank :
 But that sort of illumination stops,
 Throws back no heat upon the parent-hearth.
 The family instinct felt out for its fire
 To the Church,—the Church traditionally helps 390
 A second son : and such was Paolo,
 Established here at Rome these thirty years,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

Who played the regular game,—priest and Abate,
Made friends, owned house and land, became of use
To a personage : his course lay clear enough. 395

The youngest caught the sympathetic flame,
And, though unfledged wings kept him still i' the
cage,

Yet he shot up to be a Canon, so
Clung to the higher perch and crowded in hope.

Even our Guido, eldest brother, went 400
As far i' the way o' the Church as safety seemed,
He being Head o' the House, ordained to wive,—
So, could but dally with an Order or two

And testify good-will i' the cause : he clipped
His top-hair and thus far affected Christ. 405

But main promotion must fall otherwise,
Though still from the side o' the Church : and
here was he

At Rome, since first youth, worn threadbare of soul
By forty-six years' rubbing on hard life,
Getting fast tired o' the game whose word is—
“Wait !” 410

When one day,—he too having his Cardinal
To serve in some ambiguous sort, as serve
To draw the coach the plumes o' the horses'
heads,—

The Cardinal saw fit to dispense with him,
Ride with one plume the less ; and off it dropped. 415

Guido thus left,—with a youth spent in vain
And not a penny in purse to show for it,—
Advised with Paolo, bent no doubt in chafe
The black brows somewhat formidably, growled
“Where is the good I came to get at Rome ? 420
“Where the repayment of the servitude
“To a purple popinjay, whose feet I kiss,
“Knowing his father wiped the shoes of mine ?”

“Patience,” pats Paolo the recalcitrant—
 “You have not had, so far, the proper luck, 425
 “Nor do my gains suffice to keep us both :
 “A modest competency is mine, not more.
 “You are the Count however, yours the style,
 “Heirdom and state,—you can’t expect all good.
 “Had I, now, held your hand of cards . . . well,
 well— 430

“What’s yet unplayed, I’ll look at, by your leave,
 “Over your shoulder,—I who made my game,
 “Let’s see, if I can’t help to handle yours.
 “Fie on you, all the Honours in your fist,
 “Countship, Househeadship,—how have you mis-
 dealt ! 435

“Why, in the first place, these will marry a man !
 “*Notum tonsoribus !* To the Tonsor then !
 “Come, clear your looks, and choose your freshest
 suit,
 “And, after function’s done with, down we go
 “To the woman-dealer in perukes, a wench 440
 “I and some others settled in the shop
 “At Place Colonna : she’s an oracle. Hmm !
 “‘Dear, ‘t is my brother : brother, ‘t is my dear.
 “‘Dear, give us counsel ! Whom do you suggest
 “‘As properest party in the quarter round 445
 “‘For the Count here?—he is minded to take wife,
 “‘And further tells me he intends to slip
 “‘Twenty zecchines under the bottom-scalp
 “‘Of his old wig when he sends it to revive
 “‘For the wedding : and I add a trifle too.
 “‘You know what personage I’m potent with.”’
 And so plumped out Pompilia’s name the first.
 She told them of the household and its ways,
 The easy husband and the shrewder wife
 In Via Vittoria,—how the tall young girl,
 With hair black as yon patch and eyes as big 450
 455

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

As yon pomander to make freckles fly,
 Would have so much for certain, and so much more
 In likelihood,—why, it suited, slipped as smooth
 As the Pope's pantoufle does on the Pope's foot. 460
 "I 'll to the husband !" Guido ups and cries.

"Ay, so you'd play your last court-card, no doubt!"
 Puts Paolo in with a groan—"Only, you see,
 "T is I, this time, that supervise your lead.
 "Priests play with women, maids, wives, mothers
 —why ?" 465

"These play with men and take them off our hands.

"Did I come, counsel with some cut-beard gruff
 "Or rather this sleek young-old barberess ?

"Go, brother, stand you rapt in the ante-room

"Of Her Efficacity my Cardinal 470
 "For an hour,—he likes to have lord-suitors
 lounge,—

"While I betake myself to the grey mare,

"The better horse,—how wise the people's sword!—

"And wait on Madam Violante."

Said and done. 475

He was at Via Vittoria in three skips :

Proposed at once to fill up the one want

O' the burgess-family which, wealthy enough,
 And comfortable to heart's desire, yet crouched
 Outside a gate to heaven,—locked, bolted, barred, 480
 Whereof Count Guido had a key he kept

Under his pillow, but Pompilia's hand

Might slide behind his neck and pilfer thence.

The key was fairy ; its mere mention made

Violante feel the thing shoot one sharp ray 485
 That reached the womanly heart : so—"I assent !

"Yours be Pompilia, hers and ours that key

"To all the glories of the greater life !

"There 's Pietro to convince : leave that to me !"

Then was the matter broached to Pietro ; then
 Did Pietro make demand and get response 490
 That in the Countship was a truth, but in
 The counting up of the Count's cash, a lie.
 He thereupon stroked grave his chin, looked great,
 Declined the honour. Then the wife wiped tear, 495
 Winked with the other eye turned Paolo-ward,
 Whispered Pompilia, stole to church at eve,
 Found Guido there and got the marriage done,
 And finally begged pardon at the feet
 Of her dear lord and master. Whereupon 500
 Quoth Pietro—“ Let us make the best of things ! ”
 “ I knew your love would license us,” quoth she :
 Quoth Paolo once more, “ Mothers, wives and
 maids,
 “ These be the tools wherewith priests manage
 men.”

Now, here take breath and ask,—which bird o' the
 brace 505
 Decoyed the other into clapnet ? Who
 Was fool, whoknave ? Neither and both, perchance.
 There was a bargain mentally proposed
 On each side, straight and plain and fair enough ;
 Mind knew its own mind : but when mind must
 speak, 510
 The bargain have expression in plain terms,
 There came the blunder incident to words,
 And in the clumsy process, fair turned foul.
 The straight backbone-thought of the crooked
 speech
 Were just—“ I Guido truck my name and rank 515
 “ For so much money and youth and female
 charms.—
 “ We Pietro and Violante give our child
 “ And wealth to you for a rise i' the world thereby.”

Such naked truth while chambered in the brain
 Shocks nowise : walk it forth by way of tongue,— 520
 Out on the cynical unseemliness !

Hence was the need, on either side, of a lie
 To serve as decent wrappage : so, Guido gives
 Money for money,—and they, bride for groom,
 Having, he, not a doit, they, not a child
 Honestly theirs, but this poor waif and stray. 525
 According to the words, each cheated each ;
 But in the inexpressive barter of thoughts,
 Each did give and did take the thing designed,
 The rank on this side and the cash on that—
 Attained the object of the traffic, so. 530

The way of the world, the daily bargain struck
 In the first market ! Why sells Jack his ware ?
 “For the sake of serving an old customer.”

Why does Jill buy it ? “Simply not to break
 “A custom, pass the old stall the first time.” 535

Why, you know where the gist is of the exchange :
 Each sees a profit, throws the fine words in.

Don’t be too hard o’ the pair ! Had each pretence
 Been simultaneously discovered, stript 540

From off the body o’ the transaction, just
 As when a cook (will Excellency forgive ?)

Strips away those long rough superfluous legs
 From either side the crayfish, leaving folk

A meal all meat henceforth, no garnishry,
 (With your respect, Prince !)—balance had been 545
 kept,

No party blamed the other,—so, starting fair,
 All subsequent fence of wrong returned by wrong
 I’ the matrimonial thrust and parry, at least
 Had followed on equal terms. But, as it chanced, 550
 One party had the advantage, saw the cheat
 Of the other first and kept its own concealed :
 And the luck o’ the first discovery fell, beside,

To the least adroit and self-possessed o' the pair.
 'T was foolish Pietro and his wife saw first
 The nobleman was penniless, and screamed
 "We are cheated!"

555

Such unprofitable noise
 Angers at all times : but when those who plague,
 Do it from inside your own house and home, 560
 Gnats which yourself have closed the curtain round,
 Noise goes too near the brain and makes you mad.
 The gnats say, Guido used the candle-flame
 Unfairly,—worsened that first bad of his,
 By practising all kinds of cruelty 565
 To oust them and suppress the wail and whine,—
 That speedily he so scared and bullied them,
 Fain were they, long before five months had passed,
 To beg him grant, from what was once their wealth,
 Just so much as would help them back to Rome 570
 Where, when they finished paying the last doit
 O' the dowry, they might beg from door to door.
 So say the Comparini—as if it came
 Of pure resentment for this worse than bad,
 That then Violante, feeling conscience prick, 575
 Confessed her substitution of the child
 Whence all the harm fell,—and that Pietro first
 Bethought him of advantage to himself
 I' the deed, as part revenge, part remedy
 For all miscalculation in the pact. 580

575

580

On the other hand "Not so!" Guido retorts—
 "I am the wronged, solely, from first to last,
 "Who gave the dignity I engaged to give,
 "Which was, is, cannot but continue gain.
 "My being poor was a bye-circumstance, 585
 "Miscalculated piece of untowardness,
 "Might end to-morrow did heaven's windows ope,
 "Or uncle die and leave me his estate.

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

" You should have put up with the minor flaw,
 " Getting the main prize of the jewel. If wealth, 590
 " Not rank, had been prime object in your thoughts,
 " Why not have taken the butcher's son, the boy
 " O' the baker or candlestick-maker? In all the
 rest,
 " It was yourselves broke compact and played false,
 " And made a life in common impossible. 595
 " Show me the stipulation of our bond
 " That you should make your profit of being inside
 " My house, to hustle and edge me out o' the same,
 " First make a laughing-stock of mine and me,
 " Then round us in the ears from morn to night 600
 " (Because we show wry faces at your mirth)
 " That you are robbed, starved, beaten and what not!
 " You fled a hell of your own lighting-up,
 " Pay for your own miscalculation too :
 " You thought nobility, gained at any price, 605
 " Would suit and satisfy,—find the mistake,
 " And now retaliate, not on yourselves, but me.
 " And how? By telling me, i' the face of the world,
 " I it is have been cheated all this while,
 " Abominably and irreparably,—my name 610
 " Given to a cur-cast mongrel, a drab's brat,
 " A beggar's bye-blow,—thus depriving me
 " Of what yourselves allege the whole and sole
 " Aim on my part i' the marriage,—money to-wit.
 " This thrust I have to parry by a guard 615
 " Which leaves me open to a counter-thrust
 " On the other side,—no way but there 's a pass
 " Clean through me. If I prove, as I hope to do,
 " There 's not one truth in this your odious tale
 " O' the buying, selling, substituting—prove 620
 " Your daughter was and is your daughter,—well,
 " And her dowry hers and therefore mine,—what
 then?

“ Why, where’s the appropriate punishment for this
 “ Enormous lie hatched for mere malice’ sake
 “ To ruin me? Is that a wrong or no? 625
 “ And if I try revenge for remedy,
 “ Can I well make it strong and bitter enough? ”

I anticipate however—only ask,
 Which of the two here sinned most? A nice point!
 Which brownness is least black,—decide who can, 630
 Wager-by-battle-of-cheating! What do you say,
 Highness? Suppose, your Excellency, we leave
 The question at this stage, proceed to the next,
 Both parties step out, fight their prize upon,
 In the eye o’ the world? 635

They brandish law ’gainst law;
 The grinding of such blades, each parry of each,
 Throws terrible sparks off, over and above the
 thrusts,
 And makes more sinister the fight, to the eye,
 Than the very wounds that follow. Beside the tale 640
 Which the Comparini have to re-assert,
 They needs must write, print, publish all abroad
 The straitnesses of Guido’s household life—
 The petty nothings we bear privately
 But break down under when fools flock to jeer. 645
 What is it all to the facts o’ the couple’s case,
 How helps it prove Pompilia not their child,
 If Guido’s mother, brother, kith and kin
 Fare ill, lie hard, lack clothes, lack fire, lack food?
 That’s one more wrong than needs. 650

On the other hand,
 Guido,—whose cue is to dispute the truth
 O’ the tale, reject the shame it throws on him,—
 He may retaliate, fight his foe in turn
 And welcome, we allow. Ay, but he can’t! 655
 He’s at home, only acts by proxy here:

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

Law may meet law,—but all the gibes and jeers,
 The superfluity of naughtiness,
 Those libels on his House,—how reach at them ?
 Two hateful faces, grinning all a-glow, 660
 Not only make parade of spoil they filched,
 But foul him from the height of a tower, you see.
 Unluckily temptation is at hand—
 To take revenge on a trifle overlooked,
 A pet lamb they have left in reach outside, 665
 Whose first bleat, when he plucks the wool away,
 Will strike the grinners grave : his wife remains
 Who, four months earlier, some thirteen years old,
 Never a mile away from mother's house
 And petted to the height of her desire, 670
 Was told one morning that her fate had come,
 She must be married—just as, a month before,
 Her mother told her she must comb her hair
 And twist her curls into one knot behind.
 These fools forgot their pet lamb, fed with flowers, 675
 Then 'ticed as usual by the bit of cake
 Out of the bower into the butchery.
 Plague her, he plagues them threefold : but how
 plague ?
 The world may have its word to say to that :
 You can't do some things with impunity. 680
 What remains . . . well, it is an ugly thought . . .
 But that he drive herself to plague herself—
 Herself disgrace herself and so disgrace
 Who seek to disgrace Guido ?

There 's the clue 685

To what else seems gratuitously vile,
 If, as is said, from this time forth the rack
 Was tried upon Pompilia : 't was to wrench
 Her limbs into exposure that brings shame.
 The aim o' the cruelty being so crueller still, 690

That cruelty almost grows compassion's self
 Could one attribute it to mere return
 O' the parents' outrage, wrong avenging wrong.
 They see in this a deeper deadlier aim,
 Not to vex just a body they held dear,
 But blacken too a soul they boasted white,
 And show the world their saint in a lover's arms,
 No matter how driven thither,—so they say.

695

On the other hand, so much is easily said,
 And Guido lacks not an apologist.

700

The pair had nobody but themselves to blame,
 Being selfish beasts throughout, no less, no more :
 —Cared for themselves, their supposed good,
 nought else,

And brought about the marriage; good proved bad,
 As little they cared for her its victim—nay,
 Meant she should stay behind and take the chance,
 If haply they might wriggle themselves free.

705

They baited their own hook to catch a fish
 With this poor worm, failed o' the prize, and then
 Sought how to unbait tackle, let worm float
 Or sink, amuse the monster while they 'scaped.

710

Under the best stars Hymen brings above,
 Had all been honesty on either side,
 A common sincere effort to good end,
 Still, this would prove a difficult problem, Prince !

715

—Given, a fair wife, aged thirteen years,
 A husband poor, care-bitten, sorrow-sunk,
 Little, long-nosed, bush-bearded, lantern-jawed,
 Forty-six years old,—place the two grown one,
 She, cut off sheer from every natural aid,
 In a strange town with no familiar face—

720

He, in his own parade-ground or retreat
 If need were, free from challenge, much less check
 To an irritated, disappointed will—

How evolve happiness from such a match ? 725
 'T were hard to serve up a congenial dish
 Out of these ill-agreeing morsels, Duke,
 By the best exercise of the cook's craft,
 Best interspersion of spice, salt and sweet !
 But let two ghastly scullions concoct mess 730
 With brimstone, pitch, vitriol and devil's-dung—
 Throw in abuse o' the man, his body and soul,
 Kith, kin and generation, shake all slab
 At Rome, Arezzo, for the world to nose,
 Then end by publishing, for fiend's arch-prank, 735
 That, over and above sauce to the meat's self,
 Why, even the meat, bedevilled thus in dish,
 Was never a pheasant but a carrion-crow—
 Prince, what will then the natural loathing be ?
 What wonder if this ?—the compound plague o' 740
 the pair
 Pricked Guido,—not to take the course they hoped,
 That is, submit him to their statement's truth,
 Accept its obvious promise of relief,
 And thrust them out of doors the girl again
 Since the girl's dowry would not enter there, 745
 —Quit of the one if baulked of the other : no !
 Rather did rage and hate so work in him,
 Their product proved the horrible conceit
 That he should plot and plan and bring to pass
 His wife might, of her own free will and deed, 750
 Relieve him of her presence, get her gone,
 And yet leave all the dowry safe behind,
 Confirmed his own henceforward past dispute,
 While blotting out, as by a belch of hell,
 Their triumph in her misery and death. 755

You see, the man was Aretine, had touch
 O' the subtle air that breeds the subtle wit ;
 Was noble too, of old blood thrice-refined

That shrinks from clownish coarseness in disgust :
 Allow that such an one may take revenge, 760
 You don't expect he 'll catch up stone and fling,
 Or try cross-buttock, or whirl quarter-staff ?
 Instead of the honest drubbing clowns bestow,
 When out of temper at the dinner spoilt,
 On meddling mother-in-law and tiresome wife,— 765
 Substitute for the clown a nobleman,
 And you have Guido, practising, 't is said,
 Immitigably from the very first,
 The finer vengeance : this, they say, the fact
 O' the famous letter shows—the writing traced 770
 At Guido's instance by the timid wife
 Over the pencilled words himself writ first—
 Wherein she, who could neither write nor read,
 Was made unblushingly declare a tale
 To the brother, the Abate then in Rome, 775
 How her putative parents had impressed,
 On their departure, their enjoiment ; bade
 "We being safely arrived here, follow, you !
 "Poison your husband, rob, set fire to all,
 "And then by means o' the gallant you procure 780
 "With ease, by helpful eye and ready tongue,
 "Some brave youth ready to dare, do and die,
 "You shall run off and merrily reach Rome
 "Where we may live like flies in honey-pot" :—
 Such being exact the programme of the course 785
 Imputed her as carried to effect.

They also say,—to keep her straight therein,
 All sort of torture was piled, pain on pain,
 On either side Pompilia's path of life,
 Built round about and over against by fear, 790
 Circumvallated month by month, and week
 By week, and day by day, and hour by hour,
 Close, closer and yet closer still with pain,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

No outlet from the encroaching pain save just
 Where stood one saviour like a piece of heaven, 795
 Hell's arms would strain round but for this blue
 gap.

She, they say further, first tried every chink,
 Every imaginable break i' the fire,
 As way of escape : ran to the Commissary,
 Who bade her not malign his friend her spouse ; 800
 Flung herself thrice at the Archbishop's feet,
 Where three times the Archbishop let her lie,
 Spend her whole sorrow and sob full heart forth,
 And then took up the slight load from the ground
 And bore it back for husband to chastise,— 805
 Mildly of course,—but natural right is right.
 So went she slipping ever yet catching at help,
 Missing the high till come to lowest and last,
 To-wit a certain friar of mean degree,
 Who heard her story in confession, wept, 810
 Crossed himself, showed the man within the monk.
 "Then, will you save me, you the one i' the world?
 "I cannot even write my woes, nor put
 "My prayer for help in words a friend may read,—
 "I no more own a coin than have an hour 815
 "Free of observance,—I was watched to church,
 "Am watched now, shall be watched back pre-
 sently,—
 "How buy the skill of scribe i' the market-place ?
 "Pray you, write down and send whatever I say
 "O' the need I have my parents take me hence!" 820
 The good man rubbed his eyes and could not
 choose—
 Let her dictate her letter in such a sense
 That parents, to save breaking down a wall,
 Might lift her over: she went back, heaven in
 heart.
 Then the good man took counsel of his couch, 825

Woke and thought twice, the second thought the best :

“Here am I, foolish body that I be,
 “Caught all but pushing, teaching, who but I,
 “My betters their plain duty,—what, I dare
 “Help a case the Archbishop would not help, 830
 “Mend matters, peradventure, God loves mar ?
 “What hath the married life but strifes and plagues
 “For proper dispensation ? So a fool
 “Once touched the ark,—poor Uzzah that I am !
 “Oh married ones, much rather should I bid, 835
 “In patience all of ye possess your souls !
 “This life is brief and troubles die with it :
 “Where were the prick to soar up homeward else?”
 So saying, he burnt the letter he had writ,
 Said *Ave* for her intention, in its place, 840
 Took snuff and comfort, and had done with all.
 Then the grim arms stretched yet a little more
 And each touched each, all but one streak i’ the
 midst,

Whereat stood Caponsacchi, who cried, “This way,
 “Out by me ! Hesitate one moment more 845
 “And the fire shuts out me and shuts in you !
 “Here my hand holds you life out !” Whereupon
 She clasped the hand, which closed on hers and
 drew

Pompilia out o’ the circle now complete.
 Whose fault or shame but Guido’s ?—ask her
 friends. 850

But then this is the wife’s—Pompilia’s tale—
 Eve’s . . . no, not Eve’s, since Eve, to speak the
 truth,
 Was hardly fallen (our candour might pronounce)
 When simply saying in her own defence
 “The serpent tempted me and I did eat.” 855

So much of paradisal nature, Eve's !
 Her daughters ever since prefer to urge
 "Adam so starved me I was fain accept
 "The apple any serpent pushed my way."
 What an elaborate theory have we here, 860
 Ingeniously nursed up, pretentiously
 Brought forth, pushed forward amid trumpet-blast,
 To account for the thawing of an icicle,
 Show us there needed Ætna vomit flame
 Ere run the crystal into dew-drops ! Else, 865
 How, unless hell broke loose to cause the step,
 How could a married lady go astray ?
 Bless the fools ! And 't is just this way they are
 blessed,
 And the world wags still,—because fools are sure
 —Oh, not of my wife nor your daughter ! No ! 870
 But of their own : the case is altered quite.
 Look now,—last week, the lady we all love,—
 Daughter o' the couple we all venerate,
 Wife of the husband we all cap before,
 Mother o' the babes we all breathe blessings on,— 875
 Was caught in converse with a negro page.
 Hell thawed that icicle, else "Why was it—
 "Why?" asked and echoed the fools. "Because,
 you fools,"—
 So did the dame's self answer, she who could,
 With that fine candour only forthcoming 880
 When 't is no odds whether withheld or no—
 "Because my husband was the saint you say,
 "And,—with that childish goodness, absurd faith,
 "Stupid self-satisfaction, you so praise,—
 "Saint to you, insupportable to me. 885
 "Had he,—instead of calling me fine names,
 "Lucretia and Susanna and so forth,
 "And curtaining Correggio carefully
 "Lest I be taught that Leda had two legs,—

“—But once never so little tweaked my nose
“For peeping through my fan at Carnival,
“Confessing thereby ‘I have no easy task—
“‘I need use all my powers to hold you mine,
“‘And then,—why ‘t is so doubtful if they serve,
“‘That—take this, as an earnest of despair !’
“Why, we were quits: I had wiped the harm away,
“Thought ‘The man fears me !’ and foregone
revenge.”

We must not want all this elaborate work
To solve the problem why young Fancy-and-flesh
Slips from the dull side of a spouse in years,
Betakes it to the breast of Brisk-and-bold
Whose love-scrapes furnish talk for all the town !

Accordingly one word on the other side
Tips over the piled-up fabric of a tale.
Guido says—that is, always, his friends say—
It is unlikely, from the wickedness,
That any man treat any woman so.
The letter in question was her very own,
Unprompted and unaided : she could write—
As able to write as ready to sin, or free,
When there was danger, to deny both facts.
He bids you mark, herself from first to last
Attributes all the so-styled torture just
To jealousy,—jealousy of whom but just
This very Caponsacchi ! How suits here
This with the other alleged motive, Prince ?
Would Guido make a terror of the man
He meant should tempt the woman, as they charge ?
Do you fright your hare that you may catch your
hare ?
Consider too, the charge was made and met
At the proper time and place where proofs were
plain—

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK IV

Heard patiently and disposed of thoroughly
 By the highest powers, possessors of most light,
 The Governor for the law, and the Archbishop
 For the gospel : which acknowledged primacies, 925
 'T is impudently pleaded, he could warp
 Into a tacit partnership with crime—
 He being the while, believe their own account,
 Impotent, penniless and miserable !

He further asks—Duke, note the knotty point !— 930
 How he,—concede him skill to play such part
 And drive his wife into a gallant's arms,—
 Could bring the gallant to play his part too
 And stand with arms so opportunely wide ?
 How bring this Caponsacchi,—with whom, friends 935
 And foes alike agree, throughout his life
 He never interchanged a civil word
 Nor lifted courteous cap to—him how bend
 To such observancy of beck and call,
 —To undertake this strange and perilous feat 940
 For the good of Guido, using, as the lure,
 Pompilia whom, himself and she avouch,
 He had nor spoken with nor seen, indeed,
 Beyond sight in a public theatre,
 When she wrote letters (she that could not write !) 945
 The importunate shamelessly-protested love
 Which brought him, though reluctant, to her feet,
 And forced on him the plunge which, howsoe'er
 She might swim up i' the whirl, must bury him
 Under abysmal black : a priest contrive 950
 No better, no amour to be hushed up,
 But open flight and noon-day infamy ?
 Try and concoct defence for such revolt !
 Take the wife's tale as true, says she was wronged,—
 Pray, in what rubric of the breviary 955
 Do you find it registered—the part of a priest
 Is—that to right wrongs from the church he skip,

Go journeying with a woman that 's a wife,
 And be pursued, o'ertaken and captured . . . how?
 In a lay-dress, playing the kind sentinel 960
 Where the wife sleeps (says he who best should
 know)
 And sleeping, sleepless, both have spent the night!
 Could no one else be found to serve at need—
 No woman—or if man, no safer sort
 Than this not well-reputed turbulence? 965

Then, look into his own account o' the case!
 He, being the stranger and astonished one,
 Yet received protestations of her love
 From lady neither known nor cared about:
 Love, so protested, bred in him disgust 970
 After the wonder,—or incredulity,
 Such impudence seeming impossible.
 But, soon assured such impudence might be,
 When he had seen with his own eyes at last
 Letters thrown down to him i' the very street 975
 From behind lattice where the lady lurked,
 And read their passionate summons to her side—
 Why then, a thousand thoughts swarmed up and
 in,—
 How he had seen her once, a moment's space,
 Observed she was both young and beautiful, 980
 Heard everywhere report she suffered much
 From a jealous husband thrice her age,—in short
 There flashed the propriety, expediency
 Of treating, trying might they come to terms,
 —At all events, granting the interview 985
 Prayed for, one so adapted to assist
 Decision as to whether he advance,
 Stand or retire, in his benevolent mood!
 Therefore the interview befell at length;
 And at this one and only interview, 990

He saw the sole and single course to take—
 Bade her dispose of him, head, heart and hand,
 Did her behest and braved the consequence,
 Not for the natural end, the love of man
 For woman whether love be virtue or vice, 995
 But, please you, altogether for pity's sake—
 Pity of innocence and helplessness !

And how did he assure himself of both ?
 Had he been the house-inmate, visitor,
 Eye-witness of the described martyrdom, 1000
 So, competent to pronounce its remedy
 Ere rush on such extreme and desperate course—
 Involving such enormity of harm,
 Moreover, to the husband judged thus, doomed
 And damned without a word in his defence ? 1005
 Not he ! the truth was felt by instinct here,
 —Process which saves a world of trouble and time.
 There 's the priest's story : what do you say to it,
 Trying its truth by your own instinct too,
 Since that 's to be the expeditious mode ? 1010

“ And now, do hear my version,” Guido cries :
 “ I accept argument and inference both.
 “ It would indeed have been miraculous
 “ Had such a confidency sprung to birth
 “ With no more fanning from acquaintanceship 1015
 “ Than here avowed by my wife and this priest.
 “ Only, it did not : you must substitute
 “ The old stale unromantic way of fault,
 “ The commonplace adventure, mere intrigue
 “ In prose form with the unpoetic tricks,
 “ Cheatings and lies : they used the hackney chair
 “ Satan jaunts forth with, shabby and serviceable,
 “ No gilded gimcrack-novelty from below,
 “ To bowl you along thither, swift and sure.
 “ That same officious go-between, the wench
 “ Who gave and took the letters of the two, 1025

“Now offers self and service back to me :
 “Bears testimony to visits night by night
 “When all was safe, the husband far and away,—
 “To many a timely slipping out at large 1030
 “By light o’ the morning-star, ere he should wake.
 “And when the fugitives were found at last,
 “Why, with them were found also, to belie
 “What protest they might make of innocence,
 “All documents yet wanting, if need were, 1035
 “To establish guilt in them, disgrace in me—
 “The chronicle o’ the converse from its rise
 “To culmination in this outrage : read !
 “Letters from wife to priest, from priest to wife,—
 “Here they are, read and say where they chime in 1040
 “With the other tale, superlative purity
 “O’ the pair of saints ! I stand or fall by these.”

But then on the other side again,—how say
 The pair of saints ? That not one word is theirs—
 No syllable o’ the batch or writ or sent 1045
 Or yet received by either of the two.
 “Found,” says the priest, “because he needed
 them,
 “Failing all other proofs, to prove our fault :
 “So, here they are, just as is natural.
 “Oh yes—we had our missives, each of us ! 1050
 “Not these, but to the full as vile, no doubt :
 “Hers as from me,—she could not read, so
 burnt,—
 “Mine as from her,—I burnt because I read.
 “Who forged and found them ? *Cui profuerint !*”
 (I take the phrase out of your Highness’ mouth) 1055
 “He who would gain by her fault and my fall,
 “The trickster, schemer and pretender—he
 “Whose whole career was lie entailing lie
 “Sought to be sealed truth by the worst lie last !”

Guido rejoins—"Did the other end o' the tale 1060
 "Match this beginning! 'T is alleged I prove
 "A murderer at the end, a man of force
 "Prompt, indiscriminate, effectual: good!
 "Then what need all this trifling woman's-work,
 "Letters and embassies and weak intrigue, 1065
 "When will and power were mine to end at once
 "Safely and surely? Murder had come first
 "Not last with such a man, assure yourselves!
 "The silent *acquetta*, stilling at command—
 "A drop a day i' the wine or soup, the dose,— 1070
 "The shattering beam that breaks above the bed
 "And beats out brains, with nobody to blame
 "Except the wormy age which eats even oak,—
 "Nay, the staunch steel or trusty cord,—who cares
 "I' the blind old palace, a pitfall at each step, 1075
 "With none to see, much more to interpose
 "O' the two, three, creeping house-dog-servant-
 things
 "Born mine and bred mine? Had I willed gross
 death,
 "I had found nearer paths to thrust him prey
 "Than this that goes meandering here and there 1080
 "Through half the world and calls down in its
 course
 "Notice and noise,—hate, vengeance, should it fail,
 "Derision and contempt though it succeed!
 "Moreover, what o' the future son and heir?
 "The unborn babe about to be called mine,— 1085
 "What end in heaping all this shame on him,
 "Were I indifferent to my own black share?
 "Would I have tried these crookednesses, say,
 "Willing and able to effect the straight?"

"Ay, would you!"—one may hear the priest
 retort, 1090

“ Being as you are, i’ the stock, a man of guile,
 “ And ruffianism but an added graft.
 “ You, a born coward, try a coward’s arms,
 “ Trick and chicane,—and only when these fail
 “ Does violence follow, and like fox you bite 1095
 “ Caught out in stealing. Also, the disgrace
 “ You hardly shrunk at, wholly shrivelled her :
 “ You plunged her thin white delicate hand i’ the
 flame
 “ Along with your coarse horny brutish fist,
 “ Held them a second there, then drew out both 1100
 “ —Yours roughed a little, hers ruined through
 and through.
 “ Your hurt would heal forthwith at ointment’s
 touch—
 “ Namely, succession to the inheritance
 “ Which bolder crime had lost you : let things
 change,
 “ The birth o’ the boy warrant the bolder crime, 1105
 “ Why, murder was determined, dared and done.
 “ For me,” the priest proceeds with his reply,
 “ The look o’ the thing, the chances of mistake,
 “ All were against me,—that, I knew the first :
 “ But, knowing also what my duty was, 1110
 “ I did it : I must look to men more skilled
 “ In reading hearts than ever was the world.”

Highness, decide ! Pronounce, Her Excellency !
 Or . . . even leave this argument in doubt,
 Account it a fit matter, taken up 1115
 With all its faces, manifold enough,
 To ponder on—what fronts us, the next stage,
 Next legal process ? Guido, in pursuit,
 Coming up with the fugitives at the inn,
 Caused both to be arrested then and there 1120
 And sent to Rome for judgment on the case—

Thither, with all his armoury of proofs,
Betook himself: 't is there we 'll meet him now,
Waiting the further issue.

Here you smile

1125

"And never let him henceforth dare to plead,—

"Of all pleas and excuses in the world

"For any deed hereafter to be done,—

"His irrepressible wrath at honour's wound !

"Passion and madness irrepressible ?

1130

"Why, Count and cavalier, the husband comes

"And catches foe i' the very act of shame !

"There 's man to man,—nature must have her
way,—

"We look he should have cleared things on the
spot.

"Yes, then, indeed—even tho' it prove he erred—

1135

"Though the ambiguous first appearance, mount

"Of solid injury, melt soon to mist,

"Still,—had he slain the lover and the wife—

"Or, since she was a woman and his wife,

"Slain him, but stript her naked to the skin

1140

"Or at best left no more of an attire

"Than patch sufficient to pin paper to,

"Some one love-letter, infamy and all,

"As passport to the Paphos fit for such,

"Safe-conduct to her natural home the stews,—

1145

"Good ! One had recognized the power o' the
pulse.

"But when he stands, the stock-fish,—sticks to
law—

"Offers the hole in his heart, all fresh and warm,

"For scrivener's pen to poke and play about—

"Can stand, can stare, can tell his beads perhaps,

1150

"Oh, let us hear no syllable o' the rage !

"Such rage were a convenient afterthought

"For one who would have shown his teeth belike,

“ Exhibited unbridled rage enough,
 “ Had but the priest been found, as was to hope, 1155
 “ In serge, not silk, with crucifix, not sword :
 “ Whereas the grey innocuous grub, of yore,
 “ Had hatched a hornet, tickle to the touch,
 “ The priest was metamorphosed into knight.
 “ And even the timid wife, whose cue was—shriek, 1160
 “ Bury her brow beneath his trampling foot,—
 “ She too sprang at him like a pythoness :
 “ So, gulp down rage, passion must be postponed,
 “ Calm be the word! Well, our word is—we brand
 “ This part o’ the business, howsoever the rest 1165
 “ Befall.”

“ Nay,” interpose as prompt his friends—
 “ This is the world’s way! So you adjudge reward
 “ To the forbearance and legality
 “ Yourselves begin by inculcating—ay, 1170
 “ Exacting from us all with knife at throat!
 “ This one wrong more you add to wrong’s
 amount,—
 “ You publish all, with the kind comment here,
 “ ‘ Its victim was too cowardly for revenge.’ ”
 Make it your own case,—you who stand apart! 1175
 The husband wakes one morn from heavy sleep,
 With a taste of poppy in his mouth,—rubs eyes,
 Finds his wife flown, his strong box ransacked too,
 Follows as he best can, overtakes i’ the end.
 You bid him use his privilege : well, it seems 1180
 He ’s scarce cold-blooded enough for the right
 move—

Does not shoot when the game were sure, but stands
 Bewildered at the critical minute,—since
 He has the first flash of the fact alone
 To judge from, act with, not the steady lights 1185
 Of after-knowledge,—yours who stand at ease
 To try conclusions : he ’s in smother and smoke,

You outside, with explosion at an end :
 The sulphur may be lightning or a squib—
 He 'll know in a minute, but till then, he doubts. 1190
 Back from what you know to what he knew not !
 Hear the priest's lofty "I am innocent,"
 The wife's as resolute "You are guilty !" Come !
 Are you not staggered ?—pause, and you lose the
 move !

Nought left you but a low appeal to law, 1195
 "Coward" tied to your tail for compliment !
 Another consideration : have it your way !
 Admit the worst : his courage failed the Count,
 He 's cowardly like the best o' the burgesses
 He 's grown incorporate with,—a very cur, 1200
 Kick him from out your circle by all means !
 Why, trundled down this reputable stair,
 Still, the Church-door lies wide to take him in,
 And the Court-porch also : in he sneaks to each,—
 "Yes, I have lost my honour and my wife, 1205
 "And, being moreover an ignoble hound,
 "I dare not jeopardize my life for them !"
 Religion and Law lean forward from their chairs,
 "Well done, thou good and faithful servant !" Ay,
 Not only applaud him that he scorned the world, 1210
 But punish should he dare do otherwise.
 If the case be clear or turbid,—you must say !

Thus, anyhow, it mounted to the stage

In the law-courts,—let 's see clearly from this
 point !—

Where the priest tells his story true or false, 1215
 And the wife her story, and the husband his,
 All with result as happy as before.
 The courts would nor condemn nor yet acquit
 This, that or the other, in so distinct a sense
 As end the strife to either's absolute loss : 1220

Pronounced, in place of something definite,
 " Each of the parties, whether goat or sheep
 " I' the main, has wool to show and hair to hide.
 " Each has brought somehow trouble, is somehow
 cause
 " Of pains enough,—even though no worse were
 proved.

1225

" Here is a husband, cannot rule his wife
 " Without provoking her to scream and scratch
 " And scour the fields,—causelessly, it may be :
 " Here is that wife,—who makes her sex our
 plague,
 " Wedlock, our bugbear,—perhaps with cause
 enough :

1230

" And here is the truant priest o' the trio, worst
 " Or best—each quality being conceivable.
 " Let us impose a little mulct on each.
 " We punish youth in state of pupilage
 " Who talk at hours when youth is bound to sleep, 1235
 " Whether the prattle turn upon Saint Rose
 " Or Donna Olimpia of the Vatican :
 " T is talk, talked wisely or unwisely talked,
 " I' the dormitory where to talk at all,
 " Transgresses, and is mulct : as here we mean. 1240
 " For the wife,—let her betake herself, for rest,
 " After her run, to a House of Convertites—
 " Keep there, as good as real imprisonment :
 " Being sick and tired, she will recover so.
 " For the priest, spritely strayer out of bounds, 1245
 " Who made Arezzo hot to hold him,—Rome
 " Profits by his withdrawal from the scene.
 " Let him be relegate to Civita,
 " Circumscribed by its bounds till matters mend :
 " There he at least lies out o' the way of harm 1250
 " From foes—perhaps from the too friendly fair.
 " And finally for the husband, whose rash rule

"Has but itself to blame for this ado,—
 "If he be vexed that, in our judgments dealt,
 "He fails obtain what he accounts his right, 1255
 "Let him go comforted with the thought, no less,
 "That, turn each sentence howsoever he may,
 "There's satisfaction to extract therefrom.
 "For, does he wish his wife proved innocent?
 "Well, she's not guilty, he may safely urge, 1260
 "Has missed the stripes dishonest wives endure—
 "This being a fatherly pat o' the cheek, no more.
 "Does he wish her guilty? Were she otherwise
 "Would she be locked up, set to say her prayers,
 "Prevented intercourse with the outside world, 1265
 "And that suspected priest in banishment,
 "Whose portion is a further help i' the case?
 "Oh, ay, you all of you want the other thing,
 "The extreme of law, some verdict neat, complete,—
 "Either, the whole o' the dowry in your poke 1270
 "With full release from the false wife, to boot,
 "And heading, hanging for the priest, beside—
 "Or, contrary, claim freedom for the wife,
 "Repayment of each penny paid her spouse,
 "Amends for the past, release for the future! Such 1275
 "Is wisdom to the children of this world;
 "But we've no mind, we children of the light,
 "To miss the advantage of the golden mean,
 "And push things to the steel point." Thus the
 courts.

Is it settled so far? Settled or disturbed,
 Console yourselves: 'tislike . . . an instance, now! 1280
 You've seen the puppets, of Place Navona, play,—
 Punch and his mate,—how threats pass, blows
 are dealt,
 And a crisis comes: the crowd or clap or hiss

Accordingly as disposed for man or wife—
 When down the actors duck awhile perdue,
 Donning what novel rag-and-feather trim
 Best suits the next adventure, new effect :
 And,—by the time the mob is on the move,
 With something like a judgment *pro* and *con*,—
 There 's a whistle, up again the actors pop
 In t' other tatter with fresh-tinseled staves,
 To re-engage in one last worst fight more
 Shall show, what you thought tragedy was farce.
 Note, that the climax and the crown of things
 Invariably is, the devil appears himself,
 Armed and accoutred, horns and hoofs and tail !
 Just so, nor otherwise it proved—you 'll see :
 Move to the murder, never mind the rest !

1285

1290

1295

Guido, at such a general duck-down,
 I' the breathing-space,—of wife to convent here,
 Priest to his relegation, and himself
 To Arezzo,—had resigned his part perforce
 To brother Abate, who hustled, did his best,
 Retrieved things somewhat, managed the three
 suits—

1300

1305

Since, it should seem, there were three suits-at-law
 Behoved him look to, still, lest bad grow worse :
 First civil suit,—the one the parents brought,
 Impugning the legitimacy of his wife,
 Affirming thence the nullity of her rights :
 This was before the Rota,—Molinès,
 That 's judge there, made that notable decree
 Which partly leaned to Guido, as I said,—
 But Pietro had appealed against the same
 To the very court will judge what we judge now—
 Tommati and his fellows,—Suit the first.
 Next civil suit,—demand on the wife's part
 Of separation from the husband's bed

1310

1315

On plea of cruelty and risk to life—
 Claims restitution of the dowry paid,
 Immunity from paying any more :
 This second, the Vicegerent has to judge. 1320
 Third and last suit,—this time, a criminal one,—
 Answer to, and protection from, both these,—
 Guido's complaint of guilt against his wife
 In the Tribunal of the Governor, 1325
 Venturini, also judge of the present cause.
 Three suits of all importance plaguing him,
 Beside a little private enterprise
 Of Guido's,—essay at a shorter cut. 1330
 For Paolo, knowing the right way at Rome,
 Had, even while superintending these three suits
 I' the regular way, each at its proper court,
 Ingeniously made interest with the Pope
 To set such tedious regular forms aside,
 And, acting the supreme and ultimate judge, 1335
 Declare for the husband and against the wife.
 Well, at such crisis and extreme of straits,—
 The man at bay, buffeted in this wise,—
 Happened the strangest accident of all. 1340
 “Then,” sigh friends, “the last feather broke his
 back,
 “Made him forget all possible remedies
 “Save one—he rushed to, as the sole relief
 “From horror and the abominable thing.”
 “Or rather,” laugh foes, “then did there befall 1345
 “The luckiest of conceivable events,
 “Most pregnant with impunity for him,
 “Which henceforth turned the flank of all attack,
 “And bade him do his wickedest and worst.”
 —The wife's withdrawal from the Convertites, 1350
 Visit to the villa where her parents lived,
 And birth there of his babe. Divergence here !
 I simply take the facts, ask what they show.

First comes this thunderclap of a surprise :

Then follow all the signs and silences

Premonitory of earthquake. Paolo first

Vanished, was swept off somewhere, lost to Rome :

(Wells dry up, while the sky is sunny and blue.)

Then Guido girds himself for enterprise,

Hies to Vittiano, counsels with his steward,

Comes to terms with four peasants young and bold,

And starts for Rome the Holy, reaches her

At very holiest, for 't is Christmas Eve,

And makes straight for the Abate's dried-up font,

The lodge where Paolo ceased to work the pipes. 1365

And then, rest taken, observation made

And plan completed, all in a grim week,

The five proceed in a body, reach the place,

—Pietro's, at the Paolina, silent, lone,

And stupefied by the propitious snow.

1370 'T is one i' the evening: knock: a voice "Who's there ?"

"Friends with a letter from the priest your friend."

At the door, straight smiles old Violante's self.

She falls,—her son-in-law stabs through and through,

Reaches through her at Pietro—"With your son 1375

"This is the way to settle suits, good sire!"

He bellows "Mercy for heaven, not for earth !

"Leave to confess and save my sinful soul,

"Then do your pleasure on the body of me!"

— "Nay, father, soul with body must take its chance!"

1380 He presently got his portion and lay still.

And last, Pompilia rushes here and there

Like a dove among the lightnings in her brake,

Falls also : Guido's, this last husband's-act.

He lifts her by the long dishevelled hair,

Holds her away at arm's length with one hand,

While the other tries if life come from the mouth—
 Looks out his whole heart's hate on the shut eyes,
 Draws a deep satisfied breath, “So—dead at last!”
 Throws down the burden on dead Pietro's knees, 1390
 And ends all with “Let us away, my boys !”

And, as they left by one door, in at the other
 Tumbled the neighbours—for the shrieks had
 pierced
 To the mill and the grange, this cottage and that
 shed.

Soon followed the Public Force ; pursuit began 1395
 Though Guido had the start and chose the road :
 So, that same night was he, with the other four,
 Overtaken near Baccano,—where they sank
 By the way-side, in some shelter meant for beasts,
 And now lay heaped together, nuzzling swine, 1400
 Each wrapped in bloody cloak, each grasping still
 His unwiped weapon, sleeping all the same
 The sleep o' the just,—a journey of twenty miles
 Brought just and unjust to a level, you see.
 The only one i' the world that suffered aught 1405
 By the whole night's toil and trouble, flight and
 chase,
 Was just the officer who took them, Head
 O' the Public Force,—Patrizj, zealous soul,
 Who, having but duty to sustain weak flesh,
 Got heated, caught a fever and so died : 1410
 A warning to the over-vigilant,
 —Virtue in a chafe should change her linen quick,
 Lest pleurisy get start of providence.
 (That 's for the Cardinal, and told, I think !)

Well, they bring back the company to Rome. 1415
 Says Guido, “By your leave, I fain would ask
 “How you found out 't was I who did the deed ?

“What put you on my trace, a foreigner,
 “Supposed in Arezzo,—and assuredly safe
 “Except for an oversight: who told you, pray?” 1420
 “Why, naturally your wife!” Down Guido drops
 O’ the horse he rode,—they have to steady and stay,
 At either side the brute that bore him, bound,
 So strange it seemed his wife should live and
 speak!

She had prayed—at least so people tell you now— 1425
 For but one thing to the Virgin for herself,
 Not simply,—as did Pietro ’mid the stabs,—
 Time to confess and get her own soul saved—
 But time to make the truth apparent, truth
 For God’s sake, lest men should believe a lie: 1430
 Which seems to have been about the single prayer
 She ever put up, that was granted her.
 With this hope in her head, of telling truth,—
 Being familiarized with pain, beside,—
 She bore the stabbing to a certain pitch 1435
 Without a useless cry, was flung for dead
 On Pietro’s lap, and so attained her point.
 Her friends subjoin this—have I done with them?—
 And cite the miracle of continued life
 (She was not dead when I arrived just now) 1440
 As attestation to her probity.

Does it strike your Excellency? Why, your
 Highness,
 The self-command and even the final prayer,
 Our candour must acknowledge explicable
 As easily by the consciousness of guilt. 1445
 So, when they add that her confession runs
 She was of wifehood one white innocence
 In thought, word, act, from first of her short life
 To last of it; praying, i’ the face of death,
 That God forgive her other sins—not this, 1450

She is charged with and must die for, that she failed
 Anyway to her husband : while thereon
 Comments the old Religious—"So much good,
 "Patience beneath enormity of ill,
 "I hear to my confusion, woe is me,
 "Sinner that I stand, shamed in the walk and gait
 "I have practised and grown old in, by a child!"—
 Guido's friends shrug the shoulder, "Just this same
 "Prodigious absolute calm in the last hour
 "Confirms us,—being the natural result
 "Of a life which proves consistent to the close.
 "Having braved heaven and deceived earth
 throughout,
 "She braves still and deceives still, gains thereby
 "Two ends, she prizes beyond earth or heaven :
 "First sets her lover free, imperilled sore
 "By the new turn things take : he answers yet
 "For the part he played : they have summoned
 him indeed :
 "The past ripped up, he may be punished still :
 "What better way of saving him than this ?
 "Then,—thus she dies revenged to the uttermost
 "On Guido, drags him with her in the dark,
 "The lower still the better, do you doubt ?
 "Thus, two ways, does she love her love to the end,
 "And hate her hate,—death, hell is no such price
 "To pay for these,—lovers and haters hold." But there 's another parry for the thrust.
 "Confession," cry folks—"a confession, think !
 "Confession of the moribund is true !"
 Which of them, my wise friends ? This public one,
 Or the private other we shall never know ?
 The private may contain,—your casuists teach,—
 The acknowledgment of, and the penitence for,
 That other public one, so people say.
 However it be,—we trench on delicate ground,

1455
1460
1465
1470
1475
1480

188

Her Eminence is peeping o'er the cards,— 1485
 Can one find nothing in behalf of this
 Catastrophe? Deaf folks accuse the dumb!
 You criticize the drunken reel, fool's speech,
 Maniacal gesture of the man,—we grant!
 But who poured poison in his cup, we ask? 1490
 Recall the list of his excessive wrongs,
 First cheated in his wife, robbed by her kin,
 Rendered anon the laughing-stock o' the world
 By the story, true or false, of his wife's birth,—
 The last seal publicly apposed to shame 1495
 By the open flight of wife and priest,—why, Sirs,
 Step out of Rome a furlong, would you know
 What anotherguess tribunal than ours here,
 Mere worldly Court without the help of grace,
 Thinks of just that one incident o' the flight? 1500
 Guido preferred the same complaint before
 The court at Arezzo, bar of the Granduke,—
 In virtue of it being Tuscany
 Where the offence had rise and flight began,—
 Self-same complaint he made in the sequel here 1505
 Where the offence grew to the full, the flight
 Ended: offence and flight, one fact judged twice
 By two distinct tribunals,—what result?
 There was a sentence passed at the same time
 By Arezzo and confirmed by the Granduke, 1510
 Which nothing baulks of swift and sure effect
 But absence of the guilty, (flight to Rome
 Frees them from Tuscan jurisdiction now)
 —Condemns the wife to the opprobrious doom
 Of all whom law just lets escape from death. 1515
 The Stinche, House of Punishment, for life,—
 That's what the wife deserves in Tuscany:
 Here, she deserves—remitting with a smile
 To her father's house, main object of the flight!
 The thief presented with the thing he steals! 1520

At this discrepancy of judgments—mad,
 The man took on himself the office, judged ;
 And the only argument against the use
 O' the law he thus took into his own hands
 Is . . . what, I ask you?—that, revenging wrong, 1525
 He did not revenge sooner, kill at first
 Whom he killed last ! That is the final charge.
 Sooner? What's soon or late i' the case?—ask we.
 A wound i' the flesh no doubt wants prompt redress;
 It smarts a little to-day, well in a week, 1530
 Forgotten in a month; or never, or now, revenge!
 But a wound to the soul? That rankles worse
 and worse.
 Shall I comfort you, explaining—“ Not this once
 “ But now it may be some five hundred times
 “ I called you ruffian, pandar, liar and rogue : 1535
 “ The injury must be less by lapse of time ? ”
 The wrong is a wrong, one and immortal too,
 And that you bore it those five hundred times,
 Let it rankle unrevenged five hundred years,
 Is just five hundred wrongs the more and worse ! 1540
 Men, plagued this fashion, get to explode this
 way,
 If left no other.

“ But we left this man
 “ Many another way, and there 's his fault,”
 'T is answered—“ He himself preferred our arm 1545
 “ O' the law to fight his battle with. No doubt
 “ We did not open him an armoury
 “ To pick and choose from, use, and then reject.
 “ He tries one weapon and fails,—he tries the
 next
 “ And next : he flourishes wit and common sense, 1550
 “ They fail him,—he plies logic doughtily,
 “ It fails him too,—thereon, discovers last

“ He has been blind to the combustibles—
 “ That all the while he is a-glow with ire,
 “ Boiling with irrepressible rage, and so 1555
 “ May try explosives and discard cold steel,—
 “ So hires assassins, plots, plans, executes !
 “ Is this the honest self-forgetting rage
 “ We are called to pardon? Does the furious bull
 “ Pick out four help-mates from the grazing herd 1560
 “ And journey with them over hill and dale
 “ Till he find his enemy ? ”

What rejoinder? save
 That friends accept our bull-similitude.
 Bull-like,—the indiscriminate slaughter, rude 1565
 And reckless aggravation of revenge,
 Were all i' the way o' the brute who never once
 Ceases, amid all provocation more,
 To bear in mind the first tormentor, first
 Giver o' the wound that goaded him to fight : 1570
 And, though a dozen follow and reinforce
 The aggressor, wound in front and wound in flank,
 Continues undisturbedly pursuit,
 And only after prostrating his prize
 Turns on the pettier, makes a general prey. 1575
 So Guido rushed against Violante, first
 Author of all his wrongs, *fons et origo*
Malorum—drops first, deluge since,—which done,
 He finished with the rest. Do you blame a bull?

In truth you look as puzzled as ere I preached ! 1580
 How is that? There are difficulties perhaps
 On any supposition, and either side.
 Each party wants too much, claims sympathy
 For its object of compassion, more than just.
 Cry the wife's friends, “ O the enormous crime
 “ Caused by no provocation in the world ! ” 1585

"Was not the wife a little weak?" — inquire—
 "Punished extravagantly, if you please,
 "But meriting a little punishment?
 "One treated inconsiderately, say,
 "Rather than one deserving not at all
 "Treatment and discipline o' the harsher sort?"
 No, they must have her purity itself,
 Quite angel,—and her parents angels too
 Of an aged sort, immaculate, word and deed :
 At all events, so seeming, till the fiend,
 Even Guido, by his folly, forced from them
 The untoward avowal of the trick o' the birth,
 Which otherwise were safe and secret now.
 Why, here you have the awfulest of crimes
 For nothing! Hell broke loose on a butterfly!
 A dragon born of rose-dew and the moon!
 Yet here is the monster! Why he's a mere man—
 Born, bred and brought up in the usual way.
 His mother loves him, still his brothers stick
 To the good fellow of the boyish games;
 The Governor of his town knows and approves,
 The Archbishop of the place knows and assists :
 Here he has Cardinal This to vouch for the past,
 Cardinal That to trust for the future,—match
 And marriage were a Cardinal'smaking,—inshort,
 What if a tragedy be acted here
 Impossible for malice to improve,
 And innocent Guido with his innocent four
 Be added, all five, to the guilty three,
 That we of these last days be edified
 With one full taste o' the justice of the world?

The long and the short is, truth seems what I
 show :—

Undoubtedly no pains ought to be spared
 To give the mob an inkling of our lights.

It seems unduly harsh to put the man
 To the torture, as I hear the court intends,
 Though readiest way of twisting out the truth ;
 He is noble, and he may be innocent.

On the other hand, if they exempt the man
 (As it is also said they hesitate

1625

On the fair ground, presumptive guilt is weak
 I' the case of nobility and privilege),—

What crime that ever was, ever will be,
 Deserves the torture ? Then abolish it !

1630

You see the reduction *ad absurdum*, Sirs ?

Her Excellency must pronounce, in fine !

What, she prefers going and joining play ?

Her Highness finds it late, intends retire ?

I am of their mind : only, all this talk talked,

1635

'T was not for nothing that we talked, I hope ?

Both know as much about it, now, at least,

As all Rome : no particular thanks, I beg !

(You 'll see, I have not so advanced myself,

1640

After my teaching the two idiots here !)

V.—COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

THANKS, Sir, but, should it please the reverend
Court,

I feel I can stand somehow, half sit down
Without help, make shift to even speak, you see,
Fortified by the sip of . . . why, 't is wine,
Velletri,—and not vinegar and gall,
So changed and good the times grow ! Thanks,
kind Sir !

Oh, but one sip 's enough ! I want my head
To save my neck, there 's work awaits me still.
How cautious and considerate . . . aie, aie, aie,
Not your fault, sweet Sir ! Come, you take to
heart

An ordinary matter. Law is law.

Noblemen were exempt, the vulgar thought,
From racking ; but, since law thinks otherwise,
I have been put to the rack : all 's over now,
And neither wrist—what men style, out of joint : 15
If any harm be, 't is the shoulder-blade,
The left one, that seems wrong i' the socket,—
Sirs,

Much could not happen, I was quick to faint,
Being past my prime of life, and out of health.
In short, I thank you,—yes, and mean the word. 20
Needs must the Court be slow to understand
How this quite novel form of taking pain,
This getting tortured merely in the flesh,
Amounts to almost an agreeable change
In my case, me fastidious, plied too much



Petrutto dell'infelice Giusto Finocchiaro

il quale fu daupitato in Roma il 22 febbraio 1698

Engraved by J. Brook from a Drawing made on the day of Giusto's execution

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

With opposite treatment, used (forgive the joke)
To the rasp-tooth toying with this brain of mine,
And, in and out my heart, the play o' the probe.
Four years have I been operated on
I' the soul, do you see—its tense or tremulous
part—

30

My self-respect, my care for a good name,
Pride in an old one, love of kindred—just
A mother, brothers, sisters, and the like,
That looked up to my face when days were dim,
And fancied they found light there—no one spot, 35
Foppishly sensitive, but has paid its pang.
That, and not this you now oblige me with,
That was the Vigil-torment, if you please !
The poor old noble House that drew the rags
O' the Franceschini's once superb array 40
Close round her, hoped to slink unchallenged
by,—

45

Pluck off these ! Turn the drapery inside out
And teach the tittering town how scarlet wears !
Show men the lucklessness, the improvidence
Of the easy-natured Count before this Count, 45
The father I have some slight feeling for,
Who let the world slide, nor foresaw that friends
Then proud to cap and kiss their patron's shoe,
Would, when the purse he left held spider-webs,
Properly push his child to wall one day ! 50
Mimic the tetchy humour, furtive glance,
And brow where half was furious, half fatigued,
O' the same son got to be of middle age,
Sour, saturnine,—your humble servant here,—
When things go cross and the young wife, he finds 55
Take to the window at a whistle's bid,
And yet demurs thereon, preposterous fool !—
Whereat the worthies judge he wants advice
And beg to civilly ask what 's evil here,

55

50

Perhaps remonstrate on the habit they deem 60
 He 's given unduly to, of beating her :
 . . . Oh, sure he beats her—why says John so else,
 Who is cousin to George who is sib to Tecla's self
 Who cooks the meal and combs the lady's hair ?
 What ! 'T is my wrist you merely dislocate 65
 For the future when you mean me martyrdom ?
 —Let the old mother's economy alone,
 How the brocade-strips saved o' the seamy side
 O' the wedding-gown buy raiment for a year ?
 —How she can dress and dish up—lordly dish 70
 Fit for a duke, lamb's head and purtenance—
 With her proud hands, feast household so a week ?
 No word o' the wine rejoicing God and man
 The less when three-parts water ? Then, I say,
 A trifle of torture to the flesh, like yours, 75
 While soul is spared such foretaste of hell-fire,
 Is naught. But I curtail the catalogue
 Through policy,—a rhetorician's trick,—
 Because I would reserve some choicer points
 O' the practice, more exactly parallel 80
 (Having an eye to climax) with what gift,
 Eventual grace the Court may have in store
 I' the way of plague—what crown of punishments.
 When I am hanged or headed, time enough
 To prove the tenderness of only that, 85
 Mere heading, hanging,—not their counterpart,
 Not demonstration public and precise
 That I, having married the mongrel of a drab,
 Am bound to grant that mongrel-brat, my wife,
 Her mother's birthright-license as is just,— 90
 Let her sleep undisturbed, i' the family style,
 Her sleep out in the embraces of a priest,
 Nor disallow their bastard as my heir !
 Your sole mistake,—dare I submit so much
 To the reverend Court ?—has been in all this pains 95

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

To make a stone roll down hill,—rack and wrench
And rend a man to pieces, all for what?
Why—make him ope mouth in his own defence,
Show cause for what he has done, the irregular
deed,

(Since that he did it, scarce dispute can be) 100

And clear his fame a little, beside the luck
Of stopping even yet, if possible,
Discomfort to his flesh from noose or axe—
For that, out come the implements of law!
May it content my lords the gracious Court 105

To listen only half so patient-long

As I will in that sense profusely speak,

And—fie, they shall not call in screws to help!

I killed Pompilia Franceschini, Sirs;

Killed too the Comparini, husband, wife,

Who called themselves, by a notorious lie,

Her father and her mother to ruin me.

There's the irregular deed: you want no more

Than right interpretation of the same,

And truth so far—am I to understand?

To that then, with convenient speed,—because

Now I consider,—yes, despite my boast,

There is an ailing in this omoplat

May clip my speech all too abruptly short,

Whatever the good-will in me. Now for truth!

120

I' the name of the indivisible Trinity!
Will my lords, in the plenitude of their light,
Weigh well that all this trouble has come on me
Through my persistent treading in the paths
Where I was trained to go,—wearing that yoke 125
My shoulder was predestined to receive,
Born to the hereditary stoop and crease?
Noble, I recognized my nobler still,
The Church, my suzerain; no mock-mistress, she;

125

The secular owned the spiritual : mates of mine 130
 Have thrown their careless hoofs up at her call
 " Forsake the clover and come drag my wain ! "
 There they go cropping : I protruded nose
 To halter, bent my back of docile beast,
 And now am whealed, one wide wound all of me, 135
 For being found at the eleventh hour o' the day
 Padding the mill-track, not neck-deep in grass :
 —My one fault, I am stiffened by my work,
 —My one reward, I help the Court to smile !

I am representative of a great line, 140
 One of the first of the old families
 In Arezzo, ancientest of Tuscan towns.
 When my worst foe is fain to challenge this,
 His worst exception runs—not first in rank
 But second, noble in the next degree 145
 Only ; not malice' self maligns me more.
 So, my lord opposite has composed, we know,
 A marvel of a book, sustains the point
 That Francis boasts the primacy 'mid saints ;
 Yet not inaptly hath his argument 150
 Obtained response from yon my other lord
 In thesis published with the world's applause
 —Rather 't is Dominic such post befits :
 Why, at the worst, Francis stays Francis still,
 Second in rank to Dominic it may be, 155
 Still, very saintly, very like our Lord ;
 And I at least descend from Guido once
 Homager to the Empire, nought below—
 Of which account as proof that, none o' the line
 Having a single gift beyond brave blood, 160
 Or able to do aught but give, give, give
 In blood and brain, in house and land and cash,
 Not get and garner as the vulgar may,
 We became poor as Francis or our Lord.

Be that as it likes you, Sirs,—whenever it chanced 165
 Myself grew capable anyway of remark,
 (Which was soon—penury makes wit premature)

This struck me, I was poor who should be rich
 Or pay that fault to the world which trifles not
 When lineage lacks the flag yet lifts the pole : 170
 On, therefore, I must move forthwith, transfer
 My stranded self, born fish with gill and fin
 Fit for the deep sea, now left flap bare-backed
 In slush and sand, a show to crawlers vile
 Reared of the low-tide and aright therein. 175

The enviable youth with the old name,
 Wide chest, stout arms, sound brow and pricking
 veins,

A heartful of desire, man's natural load,
 A brainful of belief, the noble's lot,—

All this life, cramped and gasping, high and dry 180
 I' the wave's retreat,—the misery, good my lords,
 Which made you merriment at Rome of late,—
 It made me reason, rather—muse, demand

—Why our bare dropping palace, in the street
 Where such-an-one whose grandfather sold tripe 185
 Was adding to his purchased pile a fourth
 Tall tower, could hardly show a turret sound ?

Why Countess Beatrice, whose son I am,
 Cowered in the winter-time as she spun flax,
 Blew on the earthen basket of live ash, 190
 Instead of jaunting forth in coach and six

Like such-another widow who ne'er was wed ?
 I asked my fellows, how came this about ?
 “ Why, Jack, the puttler's child, perhaps thecamp's,

“ Went to the wars, fought sturdily, took a town 195
 “ And got rewarded as was natural.

“ She of the coach and six—excuse me there !
 “ Why, don't you know the story of her friend ?
 “ A clown dressed vines on somebody's estate,

“ His boy recoiled from muck, liked Latin more, 200
 “ Stuck to his pen and got to be a priest,
 “ Till one day . . . don’t you mind that telling tract
 “ Against Molinos, the old Cardinal wrote?
 “ He penned and dropped it in the patron’s desk
 “ Who, deep in thought and absent much of mind, 205
 “ Licensed the thing, allowed it for his own ;
 “ Quick came promotion,—*suum cuique*, Count !
 “ Oh, he can pay for coach and six, be sure !”
 “ —Well, let me go, do likewise: war’s the word—
 “ That way the Franceschini worked at first, 210
 “ I’ll take my turn, try soldiership.” —“ What, you ?
 “ The eldest son and heir and prop o’ the house,
 “ So do you see your duty ? Here’s your post,
 “ Hard by the hearth and altar. (Roam from roof,
 “ This youngster, play the gipsy out of doors, 215
 “ And who keeps kith and kin that fall on us ?)
 “ Stand fast, stick tight, conserve your gods at
 home !”
 “ —Well then, the quiet course, the contrary trade !
 “ We had a cousin amongst us once was Pope,
 “ And minor glories manifold. Try the Church, 220
 “ The tonsure, and,—since heresy’s but half-slain
 “ Even by the Cardinal’s tract he thought he
 wrote,—
 “ Have at Molinos !”—“ Have at a fool’s head !
 “ You a priest ? How were marriage possible ?
 “ There must be Franceschini till time ends— 225
 “ That’s your vocation. Make your brothers
 priests,
 “ Paul shall be porporate, and Girolamo step
 “ Red-stockinged in the presence when you choose,
 “ But save one Franceschini for the age ! 230
 “ Be not the vine but dig and dung its root,
 “ Be not a priest but gird up priesthood’s loins,
 “ With one foot in Arezzo stride to Rome,

“Spend yourself there and bring the purchase back!
“Go hence to Rome, be guided !”

So I was.

235

I turned alike from the hill-side zig-zag thread
Of way to the table-land a soldier takes,
Alike from the low-lying pasture-place
Where churchmen graze, recline and ruminates,
—Ventured to mount no platform like my lords 240
Who judge the world, bear brain I dare not brag—
But stationed me, might thus the expression serve,
As who should fetch and carry, come and go,
Meddle and make i’ the cause my lords love most—
The public weal, which hangs to the law, which holds 245
By the Church, which happens to be through God
himself.

Humbly I helped the Church till here I stand,—
Or would stand but for the omoplat, you see !
Bidden qualify for Rome, I, having a field,
Went, sold it, laid the sum at Peter’s foot : 250
Which means—I settled home-accounts with speed,
Set apart just a modicum should suffice
To hold the villa’s head above the waves
Of weed inundating its oil and wine,
And prop roof, stanchion wall o’ the palace so 255
As to keep breath i’ the body, out of heart
Amid the advance of neighbouring loftiness—
(People like building where they used to beg)—
Till succoured one day,—shared the residue
Between my mother and brothers and sisters there, 260
Black-eyed babe Donna This and Donna That,
As near to starving as might decently be,
—Left myself journey-charges, change of suit,
A purse to put i’ the pocket of the Groom
O’ the Chamber of the patron, and a glove 265
With a ring to it for the digits of the niece

Sure to be helpful in his household,—then
 Started for Rome, and led the life prescribed.
 Close to the Church, though clean of it, I assumed
 Three or four orders of no consequence, 270
 —They cast out evil spirits and exorcise,
 For example; bind a man to nothing more,
 Give clerical savour to his layman's-salt,
 Facilitate his claim to loaf and fish
 Should miracle leave, beyond what feeds the flock, 275
 Fragments to brim the basket of a friend—
 While, for the world's sake, I rode, danced and
 gamed,
 Quitted me like a courtier, measured mine
 With whatsoever blade had fame in fence,
 —Ready to let the basket go its round 280
 Even though my turn was come to help myself,
 Should Dives count on me at dinner-time
 As just the understander of a joke
 And not immoderate in repartee.
Utrique sic paratus, Sirs, I said, 285
 “Here,” (in the fortitude of years fifteen,
 So good a pedagogue is penury)
 “Here wait, do service,—serving and to serve!
 “And, in due time, I nowise doubt at all,
 “The recognition of my service comes. 290
 “Next year I 'm only sixteen. I can wait.”

I waited thirty years, may it please the Court :
 Saw meanwhile many a denizen o' the dung
 Hop, skip, jump o'er my shoulder, make him wings
 And fly aloft,—succeed, in the usual phrase. 295
 Everyone soon or late comes round by Rome :
 Stand still here, you 'll see all in turn succeed.
 Why, look you, so and so, the physician here,
 My father's lacquey's son we sent to school,
 Doctored and dosed this Eminence and that, 300

Salved the last Pope his certain obstinate sore,
 Soon bought land as became him, names it now :
 I grasp bell at his griffin-guarded gate,
 Traverse the half-mile avenue,—a term,
 A cypress, and a statue, three and three,— 305
 Deliver message from my Monsignor,
 With varlety at lounge i' the vestibule
 I 'm barred from who bear mud upon my shoe.
 My father's chaplain's nephew, Chamberlain,—
 Nothing less, please you!—courteous all the same, 310
 —He does not see me though I wait an hour
 At his staircase-landing 'twixt the brace of busts,
 A noseless Sylla, Marius maimed to match,
 My father gave him for a hexastich
 Made on my birthday,—but he sends me down, 315
 To make amends, that relic I prize most—
 The unburnt end o' the very candle, Sirs,
 Purfled with paint so prettily round and round,
 He carried in such state last Peter's-day,—
 In token I, his gentleman and squire, 320
 Had held the bridle, walked his managed mule
 Without a tittup the procession through.
 Nay, the official,—one you know, sweet lords!—
 Who drew the warrant for my transfer late
 To the New Prisons from Tordinona,—he 325
 Graciously had remembrance—“Francesc . . . ha?
 “His sire, now—how a thing shall come about!—
 “Paid me a dozen florins above the fee,
 “For drawing deftly up a deed of sale
 “When troubles fell so thick on him, good heart, 330
 “And I was prompt and pushing! By all means!
 “At the New Prisons be it his son shall lie,—
 “Anything for an old friend!” and thereat
 Signed name with triple flourish underneath.
 These were my fellows, such their fortunes now, 335
 While I—kept fasts and feasts innumerable,

Matins and vespers, functions to no end
 I' the train of Monsignor and Eminence,
 As gentleman-squire, and for my zeal's reward
 Have rarely missed a place at the table-foot 340
 Except when some Ambassador, or such like,
 Brought his own people. Brief, one day I felt
 The tick of time inside me, turning-point
 And slight sense there was now enough of this :
 That I was near my seventh climacteric, 345
 Hard upon, if not over, the middle life,
 And, although fed by the east-wind, fulsome-fine
 With foretaste of the Land of Promise, still
 My gorge gave symptom it might play me false ;
 Better not press it further,—be content 350
 With living and dying only a nobleman,
 Who merely had a father great and rich,
 Who simply had one greater and richer yet,
 And so on back and back till first and best
 Began i' the night ; I finish in the day. 355
 "The mother must be getting old," I said ;
 "The sisters are well wedded away, our name
 "Can manage to pass a sister off, at need,
 "And do for dowry : both my brothers thrive—
 "Regular priests they are, nor, bat-like, 'bide 360
 "'Twixt flesh and fowl with neither privilege.
 "My spare revenue must keep me and mine.
 "I am tired : Arezzo's air is good to breathe ;
 "Vittiano,—one limes flocks of thrushes there ;
 "A leatherne coat costs little and lasts long : 365
 "Let me bid hope good-bye, content at home !"
 Thus, one day, I disbosomed me and bowed.
 Whereat began the little buzz and thrill
 O' the gazers round me ; each face brightened up :
 As when at your Casino, deep in dawn, 370
 A gamester says at last, "I play no more,
 "Forego gain, acquiesce in loss, withdraw

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

“Anyhow”: and the watchers of his ways,
A trifle struck compunctious at the word,
Yet sensible of relief, breathe free once more,
Break up the ring, venture polite advice—
“How, Sir? So scant of heart and hope indeed?
“Retire with neither cross nor pile from play?—
“So incurious, so short-casting?—give your chance
“To a younger, stronger, bolder spirit belike,
“Just when luck turns and the fine throw sweeps
 all?”

380
Such was the chorus: and its goodwill meant—
“See that the loser leave door handsomely!
“There’s an ill look,—it’s sinister, spoils sport,
“When an old bruised and battered year-by-year
 385
“Fighter with fortune, not a penny in poke,
“Reels down the steps of our establishment
“And staggers on broad daylight and the world,
“In shagrag beard and doleful doublet, drops
“And breaks his heart on the outside: people prate
 390
“Such is the profit of a trip upstairs!”
“Contrive he sidle forth, baulked of the blow
“Best dealt by way of moral, bidding down
“No curse but blessings rather on our heads
“For some poor prize he bears at tattered breast,
 395
“Some palpable sort of kind of good to set
“Over and against the grievance: give him quick!”
Whereon protested Paul, “Go hang yourselves!
“Leave him to me. Count Guido and brother of
 mine,
“A word in your ear! Take courage, since faint heart
 400
“Ne’er won . . . aha, fair lady, don’t men say?
“There’s a *sors*, there’s a right Virgilian dip!
“Do you see the happiness o’ the hint? At worst,
“If the Church want no more of you, the Court
“No more, and the Camp as little, the ingrates,
 405
—come,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

“ Count you are counted: still you’ve coat to back,
“ Not cloth of gold and tissue, as we hoped,
“ But cloth with sparks and spangles on its frieze
“ From Camp, Court, Church, enough to make a
 shine,
“ Entitle you to carry home a wife
“ With the proper dowry, let the worst betide!
“ Why, it was just a wife you meant to take !”

Now, Paul's advice was weighty : priests should know :

And Paul apprised me, ere the week was out,
That Pietro and Violante, the easy pair,
The cits enough, with stomach to be more,
Had just the daughter and exact the sum
To truck for the quality of myself: "She 's young,
"Pretty and rich: you 're noble, classic, choice.
"Is it to be a match?" "A match," said I.
Done! He proposed all, I accepted all,
And we performed all. So I said and did
Simply. As simply followed, not at first
But with the outbreak of misfortune, still
One comment on the saying and doing—"What? 425
"No blush at the avowal you dared buy
"A girl of age beseems your granddaughter,
"Like ox or ass? Are flesh and blood a ware?
"Are heart and soul a chattel?"

Softly, Sirs ! 430

Will the Court of its charity teach poor me
Anxious to learn, of any way i' the world,
Allowed by custom and convenience, save
This same which, taught from my youth up, I trod?
Take me along with you; where was the wrong step? 435
If what I gave in barter, style and state
And all that hangs to Franceschinihood,
Were worthless,—why, society goes to ground,

Its rules are idiot's-rambling. Honour of birth,—
If that thing has no value, cannot buy

440

Something with value of another sort,
You 've no reward nor punishment to give
I' the giving or the taking honour ; straight
Your social fabric, pinnacle to base,
Comes down a-clatter like a house of cards. 445
Get honour, and keep honour free from flaw,
Aim at still higher honour,—gabble o' the
goose !

Go bid a second blockhead like myself
Spend fifty years in guarding bubbles of breath,
Soapsuds with air i' the belly, gilded brave,
Guarded and guided, all to break at touch 450
O' the first young girl's hand and first old fool's
purse !

All my privation and endurance, all
Love, loyalty and labour dared and did,
Fiddle-de-dee !—why, doer and darer both,—
Count Guido Franceschini had hit the mark 455
Far better, spent his life with more effect,
As a dancer or a prizer, trades that pay !

On the other hand, bid this buffoonery cease,
Admit that honour is a privilege, 460
The question follows, privilege worth what ?
Why, worth the market-price,—now up, now down,
Just so with this as with all other ware :
Therefore essay the market, sell your name,

465

Style and condition to who buys them best !
" Does my name purchase," had I dared inquire,
" Your niece, my lord ?" there would have been
rebuff

Though courtesy, your Lordship cannot else—
" Not altogether ! Rank for rank may stand :
" But I have wealth beside, you—poverty ;
" Your scale flies up there : bid a second bid 470

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

“Rank too and wealth too!” Reasoned like
yourself!

But was it to you I went with goods to sell?

This time’t was my scale quietly kissed the ground,
Mere rank against mere wealth—some youth be-
side,

Some beauty too, thrown into the bargain, just
As the buyer likes or lets alone. I thought
To deal o’ the square: others find fault, it seems:
The thing is, those my offer most concerned,
Pietro, Violante, cried they fair or foul?

What did they make o’ the terms? Preposterous
terms?

Why then accede so promptly, close with such
Nor take a minute to chaffer? Bargain struck,
They straight grew bilious, wished their money
back,

Repented them, no doubt: why, so did I,
So did your Lordship, if town-talk be true,
Of paying a full farm’s worth for that piece
By Pietro of Cortona—probably
His scholar Ciro Ferri may have retouched—
You caring more for colour than design—
Getting a little tired of cupids too.

That’s incident to all the folk who buy!
I am charged, I know, with gilding fact by fraud;
I falsified and fabricated, wrote
Myself down roughly richer than I prove,
Rendered a wrong revenue,—grant it all!

Mere grace, mere coquetry such fraud, I say:
A flourish round the figures of a sum
For fashion’s sake, that deceives nobody.
The veritable back-bone, understood
Essence of this same bargain, blank and bare,
Being the exchange of quality for wealth,—
What may such fancy-flights be? Flecks of oil

475

480

485

490

495

500

Flirted by chapmen where plain dealing grates.
 I may have dripped a drop—"My name I sell ; 505
 "Not but that I too boast my wealth"—as they,
 "—We bring you riches ; still our ancestor
 "Was hardly the rascallion folk saw flogged,
 "But heir to we know who, were rights of force!"
 They knew and I knew where the backbone lurked 510
 I' the writhings of the bargain, lords, believe !
 I paid down all engaged for, to a doit,
 Delivered them just that which, their life long,
 They hungered in the hearts of them to gain—
 Incorporation with nobility thus 515
 In word and deed : for that they gave me wealth.
 But when they came to try their gain, my gift,
 Quit Rome and qualify for Arezzo, take
 The tone o' the new sphere that absorbed the old,
 Put away gossip Jack and goody Joan 520
 And go become familiar with the Great,
 Greatness to touch and taste and handle now,—
 Why then,—they found that all was vanity,
 Vexation, and what Solomon describes !
 The old abundant city-fare was best, 525
 The kindly warmth o' the commons, the glad clap
 Of the equal on the shoulder, the frank grin
 Of the underling at all so many spoons
 Fire-new at neighbourly treat,—best, best and best
 Beyond compare !—down to the loll itself 530
 O' the pot-house settle,—better such a bench
 Than the stiff crucifixion by my dais
 Under the piecemeal damask canopy
 With the coroneted coat of arms a-top !
 Poverty and privation for pride's sake, 535
 All they engaged to easily brave and bear,—
 With the fit upon them and their brains a-work,—
 Proved unendurable to the sobered sots.
 A banished prince, now, will exude a juice

And salamander-like support the flame :

540

He dines on chestnuts, chucks the husks to help

The broil o' the brazier, pays the due baioc,

Goes off light-hearted : his grimace begins

At the funny humours of the christening-feast

Of friend the money-lender,—then he 's touched

545

By the flame and frizzles at the babe to kiss !

Here was the converse trial, opposite mind :

Here did a petty nature split on rock

Of vulgar wants predestinate for such—

One dish at supper and weak wine to boot !

550

The prince had grinned and borne : the citizen
shrieked,

Summoned the neighbourhood to attest the wrong,

Made noisy protest he was murdered,—stoned

And burned and drowned and hanged,—then
broke away,

He and his wife, to tell their Rome the rest.

555

And this you admire, you men o' the world, my
lords ?

This moves compassion, makes you doubt my faith ?

Why, I appeal to . . . sun and moon ? Not I !

Rather to Plautus, Terence, Boccaccio's Book,

My townsman, frank Ser Franco's merry Tales,—

560

To all who strip a vizard from a face,

A body from its padding, and a soul

From froth and ignorance it styles itself,—

If this be other than the daily hap

Of purblind greed that dog-like still drops bone,

565

Grasps shadow, and then howls the case is hard !

So much for them so far : now for myself,

My profit or loss i' the matter : married am I :

Text whereon friendly censors burst to preach.

Ay, at Rome even, long ere I was left

570

To regulate her life for my young bride

Alone at Arezzo, friendliness outbroke
(Sifting my future to predict its fault)

“Purchase and sale being thus so plain a point,

“How of a certain soul bound up, may-be,

575

“I’ the barter with the body and money-bags ?

“From the bride’s soul what is it you expect ?”

Why, loyalty and obedience,—wish and will

To settle and suit her fresh and plastic mind

To the novel, not disadvantageous mould !

580

Father and mother shall the woman leave,

Cleave to the husband, be it for weal or woe :

There is the law : what sets this law aside

In my particular case ? My friends submit

“Guide, guardian, benefactor,—fee, faw, fum,

585

“The fact is you are forty-five years old,

“Nor very comely even for that age :

“Girls must have boys.” Why, let girls say so
then,

Nor call the boys and men, who say the same,

Brute this and beast the other as they do !

590

Come, cards on table ! When you chaunt us
next

Epithalamium full to overflow

With praise and glory of white womanhood,

The chaste and pure—troll no such lies o’er lip !

Put in their stead a crudity or two,

595

Such short and simple statement of the case

As youth chalks on our walls at spring of year !

No ! I shall still think nobler of the sex,

Believe a woman still may take a man

For the short period that his soul wears flesh,

600

And, for the soul’s sake, understand the fault

Of armour frayed by fighting. Tush, it tempts

One’s tongue too much ! I’ll say—the law’s the
law :

With a wife I look to find all wifeliness,

As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree—
I buy the song o' the nightingale inside.

605

Such was the pact : Pompilia from the first
Broke it, refused from the beginning day
Either in body or soul to cleave to mine,
And published it forthwith to all the world. 610
No rupture,—you must join ere you can break,—
Before we had cohabited a month
She found I was a devil and no man,—
Made common cause with those who found as much,
Her parents, Pietro and Violante,—moved 615
Heaven and earth to the rescue of all three.
In four months' time, the time o' the parents' stay,
Arezzo was a-ringing, bells in a blaze,
With the unimaginable story rife
I' the mouth of man, woman and child—to-wit 620
My misdemeanour. First the lighter side,
Ludicrous face of things,—how very poor
The Franceschini had become at last,
The meanness and the misery of each shift
To save a soldo, stretch and make ends meet. 625
Next, the more hateful aspect,—how myself
With cruelty beyond Caligula's
Had stripped and beaten, robbed and murdered
them,
The good old couple, I decoyed, abused,
Plundered and then cast out, and happily so, 630
Since,—in due course the abominable comes,—
Woe worth the poor young wife left lonely here !
Repugnant in my person as my mind,
I sought,—was ever heard of such revenge ?
—To lure and bind her to so cursed a couch, 635
Such co-embrace with sulphur, snake and toad,
That she was fain to rush forth, call the stones
O' the common street to save her, not from hate

Of mine merely, but . . . must I burn my lips
 With the blister of the lie? . . . the satyr-love 640
 Of who but my own brother, the young priest,
 Too long enforced to lenten fare belike,
 Now tempted by the morsel tossed him full
 I' the trencher where lay bread and herbs at best.
 Mark, this yourselves say!—this, none disallows, 645
 Was charged to me by the universal voice
 At the instigation of my four-months' wife!—
 And then you ask “Such charges so preferred,
 “(Truly or falsely, here concerns us not)
 “Pricked you to punish now if not before?— 650
 “Did not the harshness double itself, the hate
 “Harden?” I answer “Have it your way and
 will!”

Say my resentment grew apace: what then?
 Do you cry out on the marvel? When I find
 That pure smooth egg which, laid within my nest, 655
 Could not but hatch a comfort to us all,
 Issues a cockatrice for me and mine,
 Do you stare to see me stamp on it? Swans are
 soft:

Is it not clear that she you call my wife,
 That any wife of any husband, caught 660
 Whetting a sting like this against his breast,—
 Speckled with fragments of the fresh-broke shell,
 Married a month and making outcry thus,—
 Proves a plague-prodigy to God and man?
 She married: what was it she married for, 665
 Counted upon and meant to meet thereby?
 “Love” suggests some one, “love, a little word
 “Whereof we have not heard one syllable.”
 So, the Pompilia, child, girl, wife, in one,
 Wanted the beating pulse, the rolling eye, 670
 The frantic gesture, the devotion due
 From Thyrsis to Neæra! Guido's love—

Why not Provençal roses in his shoe,
 Plume to his cap, and trio of guitars
 At casement, with a bravo close beside ? 675
 Good things all these are, clearly claimable
 When the fit price is paid the proper way.
 Had it been some friend's wife, now, threw her fan
 At my foot, with just this pretty scrap attached,
 "Shame, death, damnation—fall these as they may, 680
 "So I find you, for a minute ! Come this eve !"
 —Why, at such sweet self-sacrifice,—who knows ?
 I might have fired up, found me at my post,
 Ardent from head to heel, nor feared catch cough.
 Nay, had some other friend's . . . say, daughter,
 tripped 685
 Upstairs and tumbled flat and frank on me,
 Bareheaded and barefooted, with loose hair
 And garments all at large,—cried "Take me thus !
 "Duke So-and-So, the greatest man in Rome—
 "To escape his hand and heart have I broke bounds, 690
 "Traversed the town and reached you !"—then,
 indeed,
 The lady had not reached a man of ice !
 I would have rummaged, ransacked at the word
 Those old odd corners of an empty heart
 For remnants of dim love the long disused, 695
 And dusty crumblings of romance ! But here,
 We talk of just a marriage, if you please—
 The every-day conditions and no more ;
 Where do these bind me to bestow one drop
 Of blood shall dye my wife's true-love-knot pink ? 700
 Pompilia was no pigeon, Venus' pet,
 That shuffled from between her pressing paps
 To sit on my rough shoulder,—but a hawk,
 I bought at a hawk's price and carried home
 To do hawk's service—at the Rotunda, say, 705
 Where, six o' the callow nestlings in a row,

You pick and choose and pay the price for such.
 I have paid my pound, await my penny's worth,
 So, hoodwink, starve and properly train my bird,
 And, should she prove a haggard,—twist her neck! 710
 Did I not pay my name and style, my hope
 And trust, my all? Through spending these amiss
 I am here! 'T is scarce the gravity of the Court
 Will blame me that I never piped a tune,
 Treated my falcon-gentle like my finch. 715

The obligation I incurred was just
 To practise mastery, prove my mastership :—
 Pompilia's duty was—submit herself,
 Afford me pleasure, perhaps cure my bile.
 Am I to teach my lords what marriage means, 720
 What God ordains thereby and man fulfils
 Who, docile to the dictate, treads the house?
 My lords have chosen the happier part with Paul
 And neither marry nor burn,—yet priestliness
 Can find a parallel to the marriage-bond 725
 In its own blessed special ordinance
 Whereof indeed was marriage made the type :
 The Church may show her insubordinate,
 As marriage her refractory. How of the Monk
 Who finds the claustral regimen too sharp 730
 After the first month's essay? What's the mode
 With the Deacon who supports indifferently
 The rod o' the Bishop when he tastes its smart
 Full four weeks? Do you straightway slacken hold
 Of the innocents, the all-unwary ones 735
 Who, eager to profess, mistook their mind?—
 Remit a fast-day's rigour to the Monk
 Who fancied Francis' manna meant roast quails,—
 Concede the Deacon sweet society,
 He never thought the Levite-rule renounced,— 740
 Or rather prescribe short chain and sharp scourge
 Corrective of such peccant humours? This—

I take to be the Church's mode, and mine.
 If I was over-harsh,—the worse i' the wife
 Who did not win from harshness as she ought,745
 Wanted the patience and persuasion, lore
 Of love, should cure me and console herself.
 Put case that I mishandle, flurry and fright
 My hawk through clumsiness in sportsmanship,
 Twitch out five pens where plucking one would
 serve—

What, shall she bite and claw to mend the case?750
 And, if you find I pluck five more for that,
 Shall you weep “How he roughs the turtle there”?

Such was the starting ; now of the further step.
 In lieu of taking penance in good part,755
 The Monk, with hue and cry, summons a mob
 To make a bonfire of the convent, say,—
 And the Deacon's pretty piece of virtue (save
 The ears o' the Court ! I try to save my head)
 Instructed by the ingenuous postulant,760
 Taxes the Bishop with adultery, (mud
 Needs must pair off with mud, and filth with
 filth)—

Such being my next experience. Who knows not—
 The couple, father and mother of my wife,
 Returned to Rome, published before my lords,765
 Put into print, made circulate far and wide
 That they had cheated me who cheated them ?
 Pompilia, I supposed their daughter, drew
 Breath first 'mid Rome's worst rankness, through
 the deed

Of a drab and a rogue, was by-blow bastard-babe770
 Of a nameless strumpet, passed off, palmed on me
 As the daughter with the dowry. Daughter? Dirt
 O' the kennel ! Dowry? Dust o' the street !
 Nought more,

Nought less, nought else but—oh—ah—assuredly
A Franceschini and my very wife !

775

Now take this charge as you will, for false or
true,—

This charge, preferred before your very selves
Who judge me now,—I pray you, adjudge again,
Classing it with the cheats or with the lies,
By which category I suffer most !

780

But of their reckoning, theirs who dealt with me
In either fashion,—I reserve my word.

Justify that in its place ; I am now to say,
Whichever point o' the charge might poison most,
Pompilia's duty was no doubtful one.

785

You put the protestation in her mouth

“ Henceforward and forevermore, avaunt

“ Ye fiends, who drop disguise and glare revealed

“ In your own shape, no longer father mine

“ Nor mother mine ! Too nakedly you hate

790

“ Me whom you looked as if you loved once,—me

“ Whom, whether true or false, your tale now
damns,

“ Divulged thus to my public infamy,

“ Private perdition, absolute overthrow.

“ For, hate my husband to your hearts' content,

795

“ I, spoil and prey of you from first to last,

“ I who have done you the blind service, lured

“ The lion to your pitfall,—I, thus left

“ To answer for my ignorant bleating there,

“ I should have been remembered and withdrawn

800

“ From the first o' the natural fury, not flung loose

“ A proverb and a by-word men will mouth

“ At the cross-way, in the corner, up and down

“ Rome and Arezzo,—there, full in my face,

“ If my lord, missing them and finding me,

805

“ Content himself with casting his reproach

“ To drop i' the street where such impostors die.

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

"Ah, but—that husband, what the wonder
were!—

"If, far from casting thus away the rag

"Smeared with the plague his hand had chanced
upon,

"Sewn to his pillow by Locusta's wile,—

"Far from abolishing, root, stem and branch,

"The misgrowth of infectious mistletoe

"Foisted into his stock for honest graft,—

"If he repudiate not, renounce nowise,

"But, guarding, guiding me, maintain my cause

"By making it his own, (what other way?)

"—To keep my name for me, he call it his,

"Claim it of who would take it by their lie,—

"To save my wealth for me—or babe of mine

"Their lie was framed to beggar at the birth—

"He bid them loose grasp, give our gold again :

"If he become no partner with the pair

"Even in a game which, played adroitly, gives

"Its winner life's great wonderful new chance,—

"Of marrying, to-wit, a second time,—

"Ah, if he did thus, what a friend were he!

"Anger he might show,—who can stamp out flame

"Yet spread no black o' the brand?—yet, rough
albeit

"In the act, as whose bare feet feel embers scorch,

"What grace were his, what gratitude were mine!"

Such protestation should have been my wife's.

Looking for this, do I exact too much?

Why, here 's the,—word for word, so much, no
more,—

Avowal she made, her pure spontaneous speech

To my brother the Abate at first blush,

Ere the good impulse had begun to fade :

So did she make confession for the pair,

So pour forth praises in her own behalf.

810

815

820

825

830

835

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

“Ay, the false letter,” interpose my lords— 840
“The simulated writing,—’t was a trick :
“You traced the signs, she merely marked the
same,
“The product was not hers but yours.” Alack,
I want no more impulsion to tell truth
From the other trick, the torture inside there ! 845
I confess all—let it be understood—
And deny nothing ! If I baffle you so,
Can so fence, in the plenitude of right,
That my poor lathen dagger puts aside
Each pass o’ the Bilboa, beats you all the same,— 850
What matters inefficiency of blade ?
Mine and not hers the letter,—conceded, lords !
Impute to me that practice !—take as proved
I taught my wife her duty, made her see
What it behoved her see and say and do, 855
Feel in her heart and with her tongue declare,
And, whether sluggish or recalcitrant,
Forced her to take the right step, I myself
Was marching in marital rectitude !
Why, who finds fault here, say the tale be true ? 860
Would not my lords commend the priest whose
zeal
Seized on the sick, morose or moribund,
By the palsy-smitten finger, made it cross
His brow correctly at the critical time ?
—Or answered for the inarticulate babe 865
At baptism, in its stead declared the faith,
And saved what else would perish unprofessed ?
True, the incapable hand may rally yet,
Renounce the sign with renovated strength,—
The babe may grow up man and Molinist,— 870
And so Pompilia, set in the good path
And left to go alone there, soon might see
That too frank-forward, all too simple-straight

Her step was, and decline to tread the rough,
 When here lay, tempting foot, the meadow-side, 875
 And there the coppice rang with singing-birds !
 Soon she discovered she was young and fair,
 That many in Arezzo knew as much.

Yes, this next cup of bitterness, my lords,
 Had to begin go filling, drop by drop, 880
 Its measure up of full disgust for me,
 Filtered into by every noisome drain—
 Society's sink toward which all moisture runs.
 Would not you prophesy—"She on whose brow
 is stamped

"The note of the imputation that we know,— 885

"Rightly or wrongly mothered with a whore,—

"Such an one, to disprove the frightful charge,

"What will she but exaggerate chastity,

"Err in excess of wifehood, as it were,

"Renounce even levities permitted youth,

"Though not youth struck to age by a thunder-bolt?

"Cry 'wolf' i' the sheepfold, where 's the sheep
 dares bleat,

"Knowing the shepherd listens for a growl?"

So you expect. How did the devil decree?

Why, my lords, just the contrary of course!

It was in the house from the window, at the church
 From the hassock,—where the theatre lent its
 lodge,

Or staging for the public show left space,—

That still Pompilia needs must find herself

Launching her looks forth, letting looks reply

As arrows to a challenge; on all sides

Ever new contribution to her lap,

Till one day, what is it knocks at my clenched
 teeth

But the cup full, curse-collected all for me?

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

And I must needs drink, drink this gallant's
praise,

905

That minion's prayer, the other fop's reproach,
And come at the dregs to—Caponsacchi ! Sirs,
I,—chin-deep in a marsh of misery,
Struggling to extricate my name and fame
And fortune from the marsh would drown them
all,

910

My face the sole unstrangled part of me,—
I must have this new gad-fly in that face,
Must free me from the attacking lover too !
Men say I battled ungracefully enough—
Was harsh, uncouth and ludicrous beyond
The proper part o' the husband : have it so !
Your lordships are considerate at least—
You order me to speak in my defence
Plainly, expect no quavering tuneful trills
As when you bid a singer solace you,—
Nor look that I shall give it, for a grace,
Stans pede in uno :—you remember well
In the one case, 't is a plainsong too severe,
This story of my wrongs,—and that I ache
And need a chair, in the other. Ask you me
Why, when I felt this trouble flap my face,
Already pricked with every shame could perch,—
When, with her parents, my wife plagued me too,—
Why I enforced not exhortation mild
To leave whore's-tricks and let my brows alone,
With mulct of comfits, promise of perfume ?

920

925

930

“ Far from that ! No, you took the opposite course,
“ Breathed threatenings, rage and slaughter ! ”

What you will !

And the end has come, the doom is verily here,
Unhindered by the threatening. See fate's flare
Full on each face of the dead guilty three !

935

Look at them well, and now, lords, look at this !
 Tell me : if on that day when I found first
 That Caponsacchi thought the nearest way
 To his church was some half-mile round by my
 door,

940

And that he so admired, shall I suppose,
 The manner of the swallows' come-and-go
 Between the props o' the window over-head,—
 That window happening to be my wife's,—

945

As to stand gazing by the hour on high,
 Of May-eves, while she sat and let him smile,—
 If I,—instead of threatening, talking big,
 Showing hair-powder, a prodigious pinch,
 For poison in a bottle,—making believe
 At desperate doings with a bauble-sword,
 And other bugaboo-and-baby-work,—

950

Had, with the vulgarest household implement,
 Calmly and quietly cut off, clean thro' bone,
 But one joint of one finger of my wife,
 Saying "For listening to the serenade,

955

"Here 's your ring-finger shorter a full third :

"Be certain I will slice away next joint,

"Next time that anybody underneath

"Seems somehow to be sauntering as he hoped

"A flower would eddy out of your hand to his

960

"While you please fidget with the branch above

"O' the rose-tree in the terrace!"—had I done so,

Why, there had followed a quick sharp scream,
 some pain,

Much calling for plaster, damage to the dress,

A somewhat sulky countenance next day,

965

Perhaps reproaches,—but reflections too !

I don't hear much of harm that Malchus did

After the incident of the ear, my lords !

Saint Peter took the efficacious way ;

Malchus was sore but silenced for his life :

970

He did not hang himself i' the Potter's Field
 Like Judas, who was trusted with the bag
 And treated to sops after he proved a thief.
 So, by this time, my true and obedient wife
 Might have been telling beads with a gloved hand ; 975
 Awkward a little at pricking hearts and darts
 On sampler possibly, but well otherwise :
 Not where Rome shudders now to see her lie.
 I give that for the course a wise man takes ;
 I took the other however, tried the fool's, 980
 The lighter remedy, brandished rapier dread
 With cork-ball at the tip, boxed Malchus' ear
 Instead of severing the cartilage,
 Called her a terrible nickname, and the like,
 And there an end : and what was the end of that ? 985
 What was the good effect o' the gentle course ?
 Why, one night I went drowsily to bed,
 Dropped asleep suddenly, not suddenly woke,
 But did wake with rough rousing and loud cry,
 To find noon in my face, a crowd in my room, 990
 Fumes in my brain, fire in my throat, my wife
 Gone God knows whither,—rifled vesture-chest,
 And ransacked money-coffer. "What does it
 mean?"

The servants had been drugged too, stared and
 yawned

"It must be that our lady has eloped !" 995
 —"Whither and with whom?"—"With whom
 but the Canon's self?"

"One recognizes Caponsacchi there!"—
 (By this time the admiring neighbourhood
 Joined chorus round me while I rubbed my eyes)
 "T is months since their intelligence began,— 1000
 "A comedy the town was privy to,—
 "He wrote and she wrote, she spoke, he replied,
 "And going in and out your house last night

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

“Was easy work for one . . . to be plain with you . . .

“Accustomed to do both, at dusk and dawn

1005

“When you were absent,—at the villa, you know,

“Where husbandry required the master-mind.

“Did not you know? Why, we all knew, you see!”

And presently, bit by bit, the full and true

Particulars of the tale were volunteered

1010

With all the breathless zeal of friendship—“Thus

“Matters were managed: at the seventh hour of night” . . .

—“Later, at daybreak” . . . “Caponsacchi came” . . .

—“While you and all your household slept like death,

“Drugged as your supper was with drowsy stuff” . . .

1015

—“And your own cousin Guillichini too—

“Either or both entered your dwelling-place,

“Plundered it at their pleasure, made prize of all,

“Including your wife . . .”—“Oh, your wife led the way,

“Out of doors, on to the gate . . .”—“But gates are shut,

1020

“In a decent town, to darkness and such deeds:

“They climbed the wall—your lady must be lithe—

“At the gap, the broken bit . . .”—“Torrione, true!

“To escape the questioning guard at the proper gate,

“Clemente, where at the inn, hard by, ‘the Horse,’

1025

“Just outside, a calash in readiness

“Took the two principals, all alone at last,

“To gate San Spirito, which o'erlooks the road,

“Leads to Perugia, Rome and liberty.”

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

Bit by bit thus made-up mosaic-wise,
Flat lay my fortune,—tesselated floor,
Imperishable tracery devils should foot
And frolic it on, around my broken gods,
Over my desecrated hearth.

1030

So much

1035

For the terrible effect of threatening, Sirs !
Well, this way I was shaken wide awake,
Doctored and drenched, somewhat unpoisoned so.
Then, set on horseback and bid seek the lost,
I started alone, head of me, heart of me
Fire, and each limb as languid . . . ah, sweet
lords,

1040

Bethink you !—poison-torture, try persuade
The next refractory Molinist with that ! . . .
Floundered thro' day and night, another day
And yet another night, and so at last,
As Lucifer kept falling to find hell,

1045

Tumbled into the court-yard of an inn
At the end, and fell on whom I thought to find,
Even Caponsacchi,—what part once was priest,
Cast to the winds now with the cassock-rags.

1050

In cape and sword a cavalier confessed,
There stood he chiding dilatory grooms,
Chafing that only horseflesh and no team
Of eagles would supply the last relay,
Whirl him along the league, the one post more
Between the couple and Rome and liberty.

1055

'T was dawn, the couple were rested in a sort,
And though the lady, tired,—the tenderer sex,—
Still lingered in her chamber,—to adjust
The limp hair, look for any blush astray,—
She would descend in a twinkling,—“ Have you
out

1060

“ The horses therefore !”

So did I find my wife.

Is the case complete? Do your eyes here see
with mine?

Even the parties dared deny no one

1065

Point out of all these points.

What follows next?

“Why, that then was the time,” you interpose,

“Or then or never, while the fact was fresh,

“To take the natural vengeance: there and thus

1070

“They and you,—somebody had stuck a sword

“Beside you while he pushed you on your horse,—

“‘T was requisite to slay the couple, Count!”

Just so my friends say. “Kill!” they cry in a
breath,

Who presently, when matters grow to a head

1075

And I do kill the offending ones indeed,—

When crime of theirs, only surmised before,

Is patent, proved indisputably now,—

When remedy for wrong, untried at the time,

Which law professes shall not fail a friend,

1080

Is thrice tried now, found threefold worse than
null,—

When what might turn to transient shade, who
knows?

Solidifies into a blot which breaks

Hell’s black off in pale flakes for fear of mine,—

Then, when I claim and take revenge — “So
rash?”

1085

They cry—“so little reverence for the law?”

Listen, my masters, and distinguish here!

At first, I called in law to act and help:

Seeing I did so, “Why, ‘t is clear,” they cry,

“You shrank from gallant readiness and risk,

1090

“Were coward: the thing’s inexplicable else.”

Sweet my lords, let the thing be! I fall flat,

Play the reed, not the oak, to breath of man.

Only inform my ignorance ! Say I stand
 Convicted of the having been afraid,
 Proved a poltroon, no lion but a lamb,—
 Does that deprive me of my right of lamb
 And give my fleece and flesh to the first wolf ?
 Are eunuchs, women, children, shieldless quite
 Against attack their own timidity tempts ?
 Cowardice were misfortune and no crime !

1095

—Take it that way, since I am fallen so low
 I scarce dare brush the fly that blows my face,
 And thank the man who simply spits not there,—

1100

Unless the Court be generous, comprehend
 How one brought up at the very feet of law
 As I, awaits the grave Gamaliel's nod
 Ere he clench fist at outrage,—much less, stab !

—How, ready enough to rise at the right time,
 I still could recognize no time mature

1110

Unsanctioned by a move o' the judgment-seat,
 So, mute in misery, eyed my masters here
 Motionless till the authoritative word
 Pronounced amercement. There 's the riddle

solved :

This is just why I slew nor her nor him,
 But called in law, law's delegate in the place,
 And bade arrest the guilty couple, Sirs !

1115

We had some trouble to do so—you have heard
 They braved me,—he with arrogance and scorn,
 She, with a volubility of curse,

1120

A conversancy in the skill of tooth

And claw to make suspicion seem absurd,
 Nay, an alacrity to put to proof

At my own throat my own sword, teach me so
 To try conclusions better the next time,—

1125

Which did the proper service with the mob.
 They never tried to put on mask at all :
 Two avowed lovers forcibly torn apart,

Upbraid the tyrant as in a playhouse scene,
 Ay, and with proper clapping and applause 1130
 From the audience that enjoys the bold and free.
 I kept still, said to myself, "There's law!" Anon
 We searched the chamber where they passed the
 night,
 Found what confirmed the worst was feared before,
 However needless confirmation now— 1135
 The witches' circle intact, charms undisturbed
 That raised the spirit and succubus,—letters, to-
 wit,
 Love-laden, each the bag o' the bee that bore
 Honey from lily and rose to Cupid's hive,—
 Now, poetry in some rank blossom-burst, 1140
 Now, prose,—"Come here, go there, wait such a
 while,
 "He's at the villa, now he's back again :
 "We are saved, we are lost, we are lovers all the
 same!"
 All in order, all complete,—even to a clue
 To the drowsiness that happed so opportune— 1145
 No mystery, when I read "Of all things, find
 "What wine Sir Jealousy decides to drink—
 "Red wine? Because a sleeping-potion, dust
 "Dropped into white, discolours wine and shows."

 —"Oh, but we did not write a single word ! 1150
 "Somebody forged the letters in our name!—"
 Both in a breath protested presently.
 Aha, Sacchetti again!—"Dame,"—quoth the
 Duke,
 "What meaneth this epistle, counsel me,
 "I pick from out thy placket and peruse, 1155
 "Wherein my page averreth thou art white
 "And warm and wonderful 'twixt pap and pap?"
 "Sir," laughed the Lady, "'t is a counterfeit!"

“Thy page did never stroke but Dian’s breast,
 “The pretty hound I nurture for thy sake : 1160
 “To lie were losel,—by my fay, no more !”
 And no more say I too, and spare the Court.

Ah, the Court ! yes, I come to the Court’s self ;
 Such the case, so complete in fact and proof,
 I laid at the feet of law,—there sat my lords, 1165
 Here sit they now, so may they ever sit
 In easier attitude than suits my haunch !
 In this same chamber did I bare my sores
 O’ the soul and not the body,—shun no shame,
 Shrink from no probing of the ulcerous part, 1170
 Since confident in Nature,—which is God,—
 That she who, for wise ends, concocts a plague,
 Curbs, at the right time, the plague’s virulence too :
 Law renovates even Lazarus,—cures me !
 Cæsar thou seekest ? To Cæsar thou shalt go ! 1175
 Cæsar’s at Rome : to Rome accordingly !

The case was soon decided : both weights, cast
 I’ the balance, vibrate, neither kicks the beam,
 Here away, there away, this now and now that.
 To every one o’ my grievances law gave 1180
 Redress, could purblind eye but see the point.
 The wife stood a convicted runagate
 From house and husband,—driven to such a course
 By what she somehow took for cruelty,
 Oppression and imperilment of life— 1185
 Not that such things were, but that so they seemed :
 Therefore, the end conceded lawful, (since
 To save life there’s no risk should stay our leap)
 It follows that all means to the lawful end
 Are lawful likewise,—poison, theft and flight. 1190
 As for the priest’s part, did he meddle or make,
 Enough that he too thought life jeopardized ;

Concede him then the colour charity
 Casts on a doubtful course,—if blackish white
 Or whitish black, will charity hesitate? 1195

What did he else but act the precept out,
 Leave, like a provident shepherd, his safe flock
 To follow the single lamb and strayaway?
 Best hope so and think so,—that the ticklish time
 I' the carriage, the tempting privacy, the last 1200
 Somewhat ambiguous accident at the inn,
 —All may bear explanation: may? then, must!
 The letters,—do they so incriminate?
 But what if the whole prove a prank o' the pen,
 Flight of the fancy, none of theirs at all, 1205
 Bred of the vapours of my brain belike,
 Or at worst mere exercise of scholar's-wit
 In the courtly Caponsacchi: verse, convict?
 Did not Catullus write less seemly once?
 Yet *doctus* and unblemished he abides. 1210
 Wherefore so ready to infer the worst?
 Still, I did righteously in bringing doubts
 For the law to solve,—take the solution now!
 "Seeing that the said associates, wife and priest,
 "Bear themselves notwithstanding some touch of blame 1215
 "—Else why the pother, scandal and outcry
 "Which trouble our peace and require chastisement?
 "We, for complicity in Pompilia's flight
 "And deviation, and carnal intercourse
 "With the same, do set aside and relegate 1220
 "The Canon Caponsacchi for three years
 "At Civita in the neighbourhood of Rome:
 "And we consign Pompilia to the care
 "Of a certain Sisterhood of penitents
 "I' the city's self, expert to deal with such." 1225
 Word for word, there's your judgment! Read it,
 lords,

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

Re-utter your deliberate penalty
For the crime yourselves establish! Your award—
Who chop a man's right-hand off at the wrist
For tracing with forefinger words in wine 1230
O' the table of a drinking-booth that bear
Interpretation as they mocked the Church!
—Who brand a woman black between the breasts
For sinning by connection with a Jew:
While for the Jew's self—pudency be dumb! 1235
You mete out punishment such and such, yet so
Punish the adultery of wife and priest!
Take note of that, before the Molinists do,
And read me right the riddle, since right must be!
While I stood rapt away with wonderment, 1240
Voices broke in upon my mood and muse.
"Do you sleep?" began the friends at either ear,
"The case is settled,—you willed it should be so—
"None of our counsel, always recollect!
"With law's award, budge! Back into your place! 1245
"Your betters shall arrange the rest for you.
"We 'll enter a new action, claim divorce:
"Your marriage was a cheat themselves allow:
"You erred i' the person,—might have married
thus
"Your sister or your daughter unaware. 1250
"We 'll gain you, that way, liberty at least,
"Sure of so much by law's own showing. Up
"And off with you and your unluckiness—
"Leave us to bury the blunder, sweep things
smooth!"
I was in humble frame of mind, be sure! 1255
I bowed, betook me to my place again.
Station by station I retraced the road,
Touched at this hostel, passed this post-house by,
Where, fresh-remembered yet, the fugitives
Had risen to the heroic stature: still— 1260

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

“That was the bench they sat on,—there 's the board

“They took the meal at,—yonder garden-ground

“They leaned across the gate of,”—ever a word

O' the Helen and the Paris, with “Ha! you 're he,

“The . . . much-commiserated husband ?” Step 1265

By step, across the pelting, did I reach

Arezzo, underwent the archway's grin,

Traversed the length of sarcasm in the street,

Found myself in my horrible house once more,

And after a colloquy . . . no word assists ! 1270

With the mother and the brothers, stiffened me

Straight out from head to foot as dead man does,

And, thus prepared for life as he for hell,

Marched to the public Square and met the world.

Apologize for the pincers, palliate screws ? 1275

Ply me with such toy-trifles, I entreat !

Trust who has tried both sulphur and sops-in-wine !

I played the man as I best might, bade friends
Put non-essentials by and face the fact.

“What need to hang myself as you advise ? 1280

“The paramour is banished,—the ocean's width,

“Or the suburb's length,—to Ultima Thule, say,

“Or Proxima Civitas, what 's the odds of name

“And place ? He 's banished, and the fact 's the thing.

“Why should law banish innocence an inch ? 1285

“Here 's guilt then, what else do I care to know ?

“The adulteress lies imprisoned,—whether in a well

“With bricks above and a snake for company,

“Or tied by a garter to a bed-post,—much

“I mind what 's little,—least 's enough and to spare !

“The little fillip on the coward's cheek 1290

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

“Serves as though crab-tree cudgel broke his pate.

“Law has pronounced there’s punishment, less
or more :

“And I take note o’ the fact and use it thus—

“For the first flaw in the original bond,

1295

“I claim release. My contract was to wed

“The daughter of Pietro and Violante. Both

“Protest they never had a child at all.

“Then I have never made a contract : good !

“Cancel me quick the thing pretended one.

1300

“I shall be free. What matter if hurried over

“The harbour-boom by a great favouring tide,

“Or the last of a spent ripple that lifts and leaves ?

“The Abate is about it. Laugh who wins !

“You shall not laugh me out of faith in law !

1305

“I listen, through all your noise, to Rome !”

Rome spoke.

In three months letters thence admonished me,

“Your plan for the divorce is all mistake.

“It would hold, now, had you, taking thought
to wed

1310

“Rachel of the blue eye and golden hair,

“Found swarth-skinned Leah cumber couch next
day :

“But Rachel, blue-eyed golden-haired aright,

“Proving to be only Laban’s child, not Lot’s,

“Remains yours all the same for evermore.

1315

“No whit to the purpose is your plea : you err

“I’ the person and the quality—nowise

“In the individual,—that’s the case in point !

“You go to the ground,—are met by a cross-suit

“For separation, of the Rachel here,

1320

“From bed and board,—she is the injured one,

“You did the wrong and have to answer it.

“As for the circumstance of imprisonment

“And colour it lends to this your new attack,

“Never fear, that point is considered too! 1325

“The durance is already at an end;

“The convent-quiet preyed upon her health,

“She is transferred now to her parents’ house

“—No-parents, when that cheats and plunders you,

“But parentage again confessed in full, 1330

“When such confession pricks and plagues you more—

“As now—for, this their house is not the house

“In Via Vittoria wherein neighbours’ watch

“Might incommod the freedom of your wife,

“But a certain villa smothered up in vines 1335

“At the town’s edge by the gate i’ the Pauline Way,

“Out of eye-reach, out of ear-shot, little and lone,

“Whither a friend,—at Civita, we hope,

“A good half-dozen-hours’ ride off,—might, some eve,

“Betake himself, and whence ride back, some morn, 1340

“Nobody the wiser: but be that as it may.

“Do not afflict your brains with trifles now.

“You have still three suits to manage, all and each

“Ruinous truly should the event play false.

“It is indeed the likelier so to do, 1345

“That brother Paul, your single prop and stay,

“After a vain attempt to bring the Pope

“To set aside procedures, sit himself

“And summarily use prerogative,

“Afford us the infallible finger’s tact 1350

“To disentwine your tangle of affairs,

“Paul,—finding it moreover past his strength

“To stem the irruption, bear Rome’s ridicule

“Of . . . since friends must speak . . . to be round with you . . .

“Of the old outwitted husband, wronged and wroth, 1355

“ Pitted against a brace of juveniles—
 “ A brisk priest who is versed in Ovid’s art
 “ More than his Summa, and a gamesome wife
 “ Able to act Corinna without book,
 “ Beside the waggish parents who played dupes 1360
 “ To dupe the duper—(and truly divers scenes
 “ Of the Arezzo palace, tickle rib
 “ And tease eye till the tears come, so we laugh ;
 “ Nor wants the shock at the inn its comic force,
 “ And then the letters and poetry—*merum sal!*) 1365
 “ —Paul, finally, in such a state of things,
 “ After a brief temptation to go jump
 “ And join the fishes in the Tiber, drowns
 “ Sorrow another and a wiser way :
 “ House and goods, he has sold all off, is gone, 1370
 “ Leaves Rome,—whether for France or Spain,
 who knows ?
 “ Or Britain almost divided from our orb.
 “ You have lost him anyhow.”

Now,—I see my lords
 Shift in their seat,—would I could do the same ! 1375
 They probably please expect my bile was moved
 To purpose, nor much blame me: now, they judge,
 The fiery titillation urged my flesh
 Break through the bonds. By your pardon, no,
 sweet Sirs !

I got such missives in the public place ; 1380
 When I sought home,—with such news, mounted
 stair

And sat at last in the sombre gallery,
 (‘T was Autumn, the old mother in bed betimes,
 Having to bear that cold, the finer frame
 Of her daughter-in-law had found intolerable— 1385
 The brother, walking misery away
 O’ the mountain-side with dog and gun belike)
 As I supped, ate the coarse bread, drank the wine

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

Weak once, now acrid with the toad's-head-squeeze,

My wife's bestowment,—I broke silence thus : 1390

“Let me, a man, manfully meet the fact,

“Confront the worst o' the truth, end, and have peace !

“I am irremediably beaten here,—

“The gross illiterate vulgar couple,—bah !

“Why, they have measured forces, mastered mine, 1395

“Made me their spoil and prey from first to last.

“They have got my name,—'t is nailed now fast to theirs,

“The child or changeling is anyway my wife ;

“Point by point as they plan they execute,

“They gain all, and I lose all—even to the lure 1400

“That led to loss,—they have the wealth again

“They hazarded awhile to hook me with,

“Have caught the fish and find the bait entire :

“They even have their child or changeling back

“To trade with, turn to account a second time. 1405

“The brother presumably might tell a tale

“Or give a warning,—he, too, flies the field,

“And with him vanish help and hope of help.

“They have caught me in the cavern where I fell,

“Covered my loudest cry for human aid 1410

“With this enormous paving-stone of shame.

“Well, are we demigods or merely clay ?

“Is success still attendant on desert ?

“Is this, we live on, heaven and the final state,

“Or earth which means probation to the end ? 1415

“Why claim escape from man's predestined lot

“Of being beaten and baffled ?—God's decree,

“In which I, bowing bruised head, acquiesce.

“One of us Franceschini fell long since

“I' the Holy Land, betrayed, tradition runs,

“To Paynims by the feigning of a girl 1420

“ He rushed to free from ravisher, and found
 “ Lay safe enough with friends in ambuscade
 “ Who flayed him while she clapped her hands
 and laughed :

“ Let me end, falling by a like device.

1425

“ It will not be so hard. I am the last

“ O' my line which will not suffer any more.

“ I have attained to my full fifty years,

“ (About the average of us all, 't is said,

“ Though it seems longer to the unlucky man)

1430

“ —Lived through my share of life ; let all end
 here,

“ Me and the house and grief and shame at once.

“ Friends my informants,—I can bear your blow !”

And I believe 't was in no unmeet match

For the stoic's mood, with something like a smile,

1435

That, when morose December roused me next,

I took into my hand, broke seal to read

The new epistle from Rome. “ All to no use !

“ Whate'er the turn next injury take,” smiled I,

“ Here's one has chosen his part and knows his cue.

1440

“ I am done with, dead now ; strike away, good
 friends !

“ Are the three suits decided in a trice ?

“ Against me,—there 's no question ! How does
 it go ?

“ Is the parentage of my wife demonstrated

“ Infamous to her wish ? Parades she now

1445

“ Loosed of the cincture that so irked the loin ?

“ Is the last penny extracted from my purse

“ To mulct me for demanding the first pound

“ Was promised in return for value paid ?

“ Has the priest, with nobody to court beside,

1450

“ Courted the Muse in exile, hitched my hap

“ Into a rattling ballad-rhyme which, bawled

“ At tavern-doors, wakes rapture everywhere,

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

“And helps cheap wine down throat this Christ-
mas time,

“Beating the bagpipes? Any or all of these! 1455

“As well, good friends, you cursed my palace here

“To its old cold stone face,—stuck your cap for
crest

“Over the shield that 's extant in the Square,—

“Or spat on the statue's cheek, the impatient
world

“Sees cumber tomb-top in our family church : 1460

“Let him creep under covert as I shall do,

“Half below-ground already indeed. Good-bye!

“My brothers are priests, and childless so ; that's
well—

“And, thank God most for this, no child leave I—

“None after me to bear till his heart break 1465

“The being a Franceschini and my son !”

“Nay,” said the letter, “but you have just that !

“A babe, your veritable son and heir—

“Lawful,—'t is only eight months since your wife

“Left you,—so, son and heir, your babe was born 1470

“Last Wednesday in the villa,—you see the cause

“For quitting Convent without beat of drum,

“Stealing a hurried march to this retreat

“That 's not so savage as the Sisterhood

“To slips and stumbles : Pietro's heart is soft, 1475

“Violante leans to pity's side,—the pair

“Ushered you into life a bouncing boy :

“And he 's already hidden away and safe

“From any claim on him you mean to make—

“They need him for themselves,—don't fear, they
know 1480

“The use o' the bantling,—the nerve thus laid
bare

“To nip at, new and nice, with finger-nail !”

Then I rose up like fire, and fire-like roared.
 What, all is only beginning not ending now?
 The worm which wormed its way from skin
 through flesh

1485

To the bone and there lay biting, did its best,—
 What, it goes on to scrape at the bone's self,
 Will wind to inmost marrow and madden me?

There 's to be yet my representative,
 Another of the name shall keep displayed
 The flag with the ordure on it, brandish still
 The broken sword has served to stir a jakes?
 Who will he be, how will you call the man?
 A Franceschini,—when who cut my purse,
 Filched my name, hemmed me round, hustled me
 hard

1490

As rogues at a fair some fool they strip i' the midst,
 When these count gains, vaunt pillage presently:—
 But a Caponsacchi, oh, be very sure!
 When what demands its tribute of applause
 Is the cunning and impudence o' the pair of cheats,
 The lies and lust o' the mother, and the brave
 Bold carriage of the priest, worthily crowned
 By a witness to his feat i' the following age,—
 And how this three-fold cord could hook and fetch
 And land leviathan that king of pride!

1505

Or say, by some mad miracle of chance,
 Is he indeed my flesh and blood, this babe?
 Was it because fate forged a link at last
 Betwixt my wife and me, and both alike
 Found we had henceforth some one thing to love,
 Was it when she could damn my soul indeed
 She unlatched door, let all the devils o' the dark
 Dance in on me to cover her escape?
 Why then, the surplusage of disgrace, the spilth
 Over and above the measure of infamy,
 Failing to take effect on my coarse flesh

1515

Seasoned with scorn now, saturate with shame,—
 Is saved to instil on and corrode the brow,
 The baby-softness of my first-born child—
 The child I had died to see though in a dream, 1520
 The child I was bid strike out for, beat the wave
 And baffle the tide of troubles where I swam,
 So I might touch shore, lay down life at last
 At the feet so dim and distant and divine
 Of the apparition, as 't were Mary's Babe 1525
 Had held, through night and storm, the torch
 aloft,—

Born now in very deed to bear this brand
 On forehead and curse me who could not save !
 Rather be the town talk true, square's jest, street's
 jeer

True, my own inmost heart's confession true, 1530
 And he the priest's bastard and none of mine !
 Ay, there was cause for flight, swift flight and sure !
 The husband gets unruly, breaks all bounds
 When he encounters some familiar face,
 Fashion of feature, brow and eyes and lips 1535
 Where he least looked to find them,—time to fly !
 This bastard then, a nest for him is made,
 As the manner is of vermin, in my flesh :
 Shall I let the filthy pest buzz, flap and sting,
 Busy at my vitals and, nor hand nor foot 1540
 Lift, but let be, lie still and rot resigned ?
 No, I appeal to God,—what says Himself,
 How lessons Nature when I look to learn ?
 Why, that I am alive, am still a man
 With brain and heart and tongue and right-hand
 too— 1545

Nay, even with friends, in such a cause as this,
 To right me if I fail to take my right.
 No more of law ; a voice beyond the law
 Enters my heart, *Quis est pro Domino ?*

Myself, in my own Vittiano, told the tale 1550
 To my own serving-people summoned there :
 Told the first half of it, scarce heard to end
 By judges who got done with judgment quick
 And clamoured to go execute her 'hest—
 Who cried "Not one of us that dig your soil 1555
 "And dress your vineyard, prune your olive-trees,
 "But would have brained the man debauched our
 wife,
 "And staked the wife whose lust allured the man,
 "And paunched the Duke, had it been possible,
 "Who ruled the land yet barred us such revenge!" 1560
 I fixed on the first whose eyes caught mine, some four
 Resolute youngsters with the heart still fresh,
 Filled my purse with the residue o' the coin
 Uncaught-up by my wife whom haste made blind,
 Donned the first rough and rural garb I found, 1565
 Took whatsoever weapon came to hand,
 And out we flung and on we ran or reeled
 Romeward. I have no memory of our way,
 Only that, when at intervals the cloud
 Of horror about me opened to let in life, 1570
 I listened to some song in the ear, some snatch
 Of a legend, relic of religion, stray
 Fragment of record very strong and old
 Of the first conscience, the anterior right,
 The God's-gift to mankind, impulse to quench 1575
 The antagonistic spark of hell and tread
 Satan and all his malice into dust,
 Declare to the world the one law, right is right.
 Then the cloud re-encompassed me, and so
 I found myself, as on the wings of winds, 1580
 Arrived : I was at Rome on Christmas Eve.

Festive bells—everywhere the Feast o' the Babe,
 Joy upon earth, peace and good will to man !

I am baptized. I started and let drop
 The dagger. "Where is it, His promised peace?" 1585
 Nine days o' the Birth-Feast did I pause and pray
 To enter into no temptation more.
 I bore the hateful house, my brother's once,
 Deserted,—let the ghost of social joy
 Mock and make mouths at me from empty room 1590
 And idle door that missed the master's step,—
 Bore the frank wonder of incredulous eyes,
 As my own people watched without a word,
 Waited, from where they huddled round the hearth
 Black like all else, that nod so slow to come. 1595
 I stopped my ears even to the inner call
 Of the dread duty, only heard the song
 "Peace upon earth," saw nothing but the face
 O' the Holy Infant and the halo there
 Able to cover yet another face 1600
 Behind it, Satan's which I else should see.
 But, day by day, joy waned and withered off :
 The Babe's face, premature with peak and pine,
 Sank into wrinkled ruinous old age,
 Suffering and death, then mist-like disappeared, 1605
 And showed only the Cross at end of all,
 Left nothing more to interpose 'twixt me
 And the dread duty : for the angels' song,
 "Peace upon earth," louder and louder pealed
 "O Lord, how long, how long be unavenged?" 1610
 On the ninth day, this grew too much for man.
 I started up—"Some end must be!" At once,
 Silence : then, scratching like a death-watch-tick,
 Slowly within my brain was syllabled,
 "One more concession, one decisive way
 "And but one, to determine thee the truth,—
 "This way, in fine, I whisper in thy ear :
 "Now doubt, anon decide, thereupon act!" 1615

“That is a way, thou whisperest in my ear !
 “I doubt, I will decide, then act,” said I—
 Then beckoned my companions: “Time is come!”

And so, all yet uncertain save the will
 To do right, and the daring aught save leave
 Right undone, I did find myself at last
 I’ the dark before the villa with my friends,
 And made the experiment, the final test,
 Ultimate chance that ever was to be
 For the wretchedness inside. I knocked, pro-
 nounced

The name, the predetermined touch for truth,
 “What welcome for the wanderer? Open
 straight—”

To the friend, physician, friar upon his rounds,
 Traveller belated, beggar lame and blind?
 No, but—“to Caponsacchi!” And the door
 Opened.

And then,—why, even then, I think,
 I’ the minute that confirmed my worst of fears,
 Surely,—I pray God that I think aright!—
 Had but Pompilia’s self, the tender thing
 Who once was good and pure, was once my lamb
 And lay in my bosom, had the well-known shape
 Fronted me in the door-way,—stood there faint
 With the recent pang perhaps of giving birth
 To what might, though by miracle, seem my child,—
 Nay more, I will say, had even the aged fool
 Pietro, the dotard, in whom folly and age
 Wrought, more than enmity or malevolence,
 To practise and conspire against my peace,—
 Had either of these but opened, I had paused.
 But it was she the hag, she that brought hell
 For a dowry with her to her husband’s house,
 She the mock-mother, she that made the match

And married me to perdition, spring and source
 O' the fire inside me that boiled up from heart
 To brain and hailed the Fury gave it birth,—
 Violante Comparini, she it was,
 With the old grin amid the wrinkles yet,
 Opened : as if in turning from the Cross,
 With trust to keep the sight and save my soul,
 I had stumbled, first thing, on the serpent's head
 Coiled with a leer at foot of it.

1655

1660

There was the end !

Then was I rapt away by the impulse, one
 Immeasurable everlasting wave of a need
 To abolish that detested life. 'T was done :
 You know the rest and how the folds o' the thing, 1665
 Twisting for help, involved the other two
 More or less serpent-like : how I was mad,
 Blind, stamped on all, the earth-worms with the asp,
 And ended so.

You came on me that night, 1670
 Your officers of justice,—caught the crime
 In the first natural frenzy of remorse ?
 Twenty miles off, sound sleeping as a child
 On a cloak i' the straw which promised shelter first,
 With the bloody arms beside me,—was it not so ? 1675
 Wherefore not ? Why, howelse should I be found ?
 I was my own self, had my sense again,
 My soul safe from the serpents. I could sleep :
 Indeed and, dear my lords, I shall sleep now,
 Spite of my shoulder, in five minutes' space, 1680
 When you dismiss me, having truth enough !
 It is but a few days are passed, I find,
 Since this adventure. Do you tell me, four ?
 Then the dead are scarce quiet where they lie,
 Old Pietro, old Violante, side by side
 At the church Lorenzo,—oh, they know it well ! 1685
 So do I. But my wife is still alive,

Has breath enough to tell her story yet,
 Her way, which is not mine, no doubt at all.
 And Caponsacchi, you have summoned him,— 1690
 Was he so far to send for? Not at hand?
 I thought some few o' the stabs were in his heart,
 Or had not been so lavish: less had served.
 Well, he too tells his story,—florid prose
 As smooth as mine is rough. You see, my lords, 1695
 There will be a lying intoxicating smoke
 Born of the blood,—confusion probably,—
 For lies breed lies—but all that rests with you!
 The trial is no concern of mine; with me
 The main of the care is over: I at least 1700
 Recognize who took that huge burthen off,
 Let me begin to live again. I did
 God's bidding and man's duty, so, breathe free;
 Look you to the rest! I heard Himself prescribe,
 That great Physician, and dared lance the core 1705
 Of the bad ulcer; and the rage abates,
 I am myself and whole now: I prove cured
 By the eyes that see, the ears that hear again,
 The limbs that have relearned their youthful play,
 The healthy taste of food and feel of clothes 1710
 And taking to our common life once more,
 All that now urges my defence from death.
 The willingness to live, what means it else?
 Before,—but let the very action speak!
 Judge for yourselves, what life seemed worth to me 1715
 Who, not by proxy but in person, pitched
 Head-foremost into danger as a fool
 That never cares if he can swim or no—
 So he but find the bottom, braves the brook.
 No man omits precaution, quite neglects 1720
 Secresy, safety, schemes not how retreat,
 Having schemed he might advance. Did I so
 scheme?

Why, with a warrant which 't is ask and have,
 With horse thereby made mine without a word,
 I had gained the frontier and slept safe that night. 1725
 Then, my companions,—call them what you
 please,

Slave or stipendiary,—what need of one
 To me whose right-hand did its owner's work ?
 Hire an assassin yet expose yourself?
 As well buy glove and then thrust naked hand 1730
 I' the thorn-bush. No, the wise man stays at
 home,

Sends only agents out, with pay to earn :
 At home, when they come back,—he straight dis-
 cards

Or else disowns. Why use such tools at all
 When a man's foes are of his house, like mine, 1735
 Sit at his board, sleep in his bed ? Why noise,
 When there 's the *acquette* and the silent way ?
 Clearly my life was valueless.

But now

Health is returned, and sanity of soul
 Nowise indifferent to the body's harm. 1740
 I find the instinct bids me save my life ;
 My wits, too, rally round me ; I pick up
 And use the arms that strewed the ground before,
 Unnoticed or spurned aside : I take my stand, 1745
 Make my defence. God shall not lose a life
 May do Him further service, while I speak
 And you hear, you my judges and last hope !
 You are the law : 't is to the law I look.
 I began life by hanging to the law,
 To the law it is I hang till life shall end. 1750
 My brother made appeal to the Pope, 't is true,
 To stay proceedings, judge my cause himself
 Nor trouble law,—some fondness of conceit

That rectitude, sagacity sufficed
 The investigator in a case like mine,
 Dispensed with the machine of law. The Pope
 Knew better, set aside my brother's plea
 And put me back to law,—referred the cause
Ad judices meos,—doubtlessly did well. 1755

Here, then, I clutch my judges,—I claim law—
 Cry, by the higher law whereof your law
 O' the land is humbly representative,—
 Cry, on what point is it, where either accuse,
 I fail to furnish you defence? I stand 1760

Acquitted, actually or virtually,
 By every intermediate kind of court
 That takes account of right or wrong in man,
 Each unit in the series that begins
 With God's throne, ends with the tribunal here. 1770

God breathes, not speaks, his verdicts, felt not
 heard,
 Passed on successively to each court I call
 Man's conscience, custom, manners, all that make
 More and more effort to promulgate, mark
 God's verdict in determinable words, 1775

Till last come human jurists—solidify
 Fluid result,—what 's fixable lies forged,
 Statute,—the residue escapes in fume,
 Yet hangs aloft, a cloud, as palpable
 To the finer sense as word the legist welds. 1780

Justinian's Pandects only make precise
 What simply sparkled in men's eyes before,
 Twitched in their brow or quivered on their lip,
 Waited the speech they called but would not come.
 These courts then, whose decree your own con- 1785

 firms,—

Take my whole life, not this last act alone,
 Look on it by the light reflected thence!
 What has Society to charge me with?

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

Come, unreservedly,—favour none nor fear,—
I am Guido Franceschini, am I not?

1790

You know the courses I was free to take?

I took just that which let me serve the Church,
I gave it all my labour in body and soul

Till these broke down i' the service. "Specify?"

Well, my last patron was a Cardinal.

1795

I left him unconvicted of a fault—

Was even helped, by way of gratitude,

Into the new life that I left him for,

This very misery of the marriage,—he

Made it, kind soul, so far as in him lay—

1800

Signed the deed where you yet may see his name.

He is gone to his reward,—dead, being my friend

Who could have helped here also,—that, of course!

So far, there 's my acquittal, I suppose.

Then comes the marriage itself—no question,
lords,

1805

Of the entire validity of that!

In the extremity of distress, 't is true,

For after-reasons, furnished abundantly,

I wished the thing invalid, went to you

Only some months since, set you duly forth

1810

My wrong and prayed your remedy, that a cheat

Should not have force to cheat my whole life long.

"Annul a marriage? 'T is impossible!

"Though ring about your neck be brass not gold,

"Needs must it clasp, gangrene you all the same!"

1815

Well, let me have the benefit, just so far,

O' the fact announced,—my wife then is my wife,

I have allowance for a husband's right.

I am charged with passing right's due bound,—
such acts

As I thought just, my wife called cruelty,

Complained of in due form,—convoked no court

Of common gossipry, but took her wrongs—

1820

And not once, but so long as patience served—
 To the town's top, jurisdiction's pride of place,
 To the Archbishop and the Governor.

1825

These heard her charge with my reply, and found
 That futile, this sufficient: they dismissed
 The hysterick querulous rebel, and confirmed
 Authority in its wholesome exercise,
 They, with directest access to the facts.

1830

“—Ay, for it was their friendship favoured you,
 “Hereditary alliance against a breach
 “I' the social order: prejudice for the name
 “Of Franceschini!”—So I hear it said:

But not here. You, lords, never will you say

1835

“Such is the nullity of grace and truth,

“Such the corruption of the faith, such lapse

“Of law, such warrant have the Molinists

“For daring reprehend us as they do,—

“That we pronounce it just a common case,

1840

“Two dignitaries, each in his degree

“First, foremost, this the spiritual head, and that

“The secular arm o' the body politic,

“Should, for mere wrongs' love and injustice' sake,

“Side with, aid and abet in cruelty

1845

“This broken beggarly noble,—bribed perhaps

“By his watered wine and mouldy crust of bread—

“Rather than that sweet tremulous flower-like wife

“Who kissed their hands and curled about their
 feet

“Looking the irresistible loveliness

1850

“In tears that takes man captive, turns” . . .
 enough!

Do you blast your predecessors? What forbids
 Posterity to trebly blast yourselves

Who set the example and instruct their tongue?

You dreaded the crowd, succumbed to the popular
 cry,

1855

Or else, would nowise seem defer thereto
 And yield to public clamour though i' the right !
 You ridded your eye of my unseemliness,
 The noble whose misfortune wearied you,—
 Or, what 's more probable, made common cause 1860
 With the cleric section, punished in myself
 Maladroit uncomplaisant laity,
 Defective in behaviour to a priest
 Who claimed the customary partnership
 I' the house and the wife. Lords, any lie will serve ! 1865
 Look to it,—or allow me freed so far !

Then I proceed a step, come with clean hands
 Thus far, re-tell the tale told eight months since.
 The wife, you allow so far I have not wronged,
 Has fled my roof, plundered me and decamped 1870
 In company with the priest her paramour :
 And I gave chase, came up with, caught the two
 At the wayside inn where both had spent the night,
 Found them in flagrant fault, and found as well,
 By documents with name and plan and date, 1875
 The fault was furtive then that 's flagrant now,
 Their intercourse a long established crime.
 I did not take the license law's self gives
 To slay both criminals o' the spot at the time,
 But held my hand,—preferred play prodigy 1880
 Of patience which the world calls cowardice,
 Rather than seem anticipate the law
 And cast discredit on its organs,—you.
 So, to your bar I brought both criminals,
 And made my statement: heard their counter-
 charge, 1885
 Nay,—their corroboration of my tale,
 Nowise disputing its allegements, not
 I' the main, not more than nature's decency
 Compels men to keep silence in this kind,—

Only contending that the deeds avowed
Would take another colour and bear excuse. 1890

You were to judge between us ; so you did.
You disregard the excuse, you breathe away
The colour of innocence and leave guilt black,
"Guilty" is the decision of the court, 1895

And that I stand in consequence untouched,
One white integrity from head to heel.
Not guilty ? Why then did you punish them ?
True, punishment has been inadequate—

'T is not I only, not my friends that joke, 1900
My foes that jeer, who echo "inadequate"—
For, by a chance that comes to help for once,
The same case simultaneously was judged
At Arezzo, in the province of the Court
Where the crime had its beginning but not end. 1905

They then, deciding on but half o' the crime,
The effraction, robbery,—features of the fault
I never cared to dwell upon at Rome,—
What was it they adjudged as penalty
To Pompilia,—the one criminal o' the pair 1910

Amenable to their judgment, not the priest
Who is Rome's ? Why, just imprisonment for life
I' the Stinche. There was Tuscany's award
To a wife that robs her husband : you at Rome—
Having to deal with adultery in a wife 1915

And, in a priest, breach of the priestly vow—
Give gentle sequestration for a month
In a manageable Convent, then release,
You call imprisonment, in the very house
O' the very couple, which the aim and end 1920

Of the culprits' crime was—just to reach and rest
And there take solace and defy me : well,—
This difference 'twixt their penalty and yours
Is immaterial : make your penalty less—
Merely that she should henceforth wear black gloves 1925

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK V

And white fan, she who wore the opposite—
Why, all the same the fact o' the thing subsists.
Reconcile to your conscience as you may,
Be it on your own heads, you pronounced but half
O' the penalty for heinousness like hers 1930

And his, that pays a fault at Carnival
Of comfit-pelting past discretion's law,
Or accident to handkerchief in Lent
Which falls perversely as a lady kneels
Abruptly, and but half conceals her neck ! 1935

I acquiesce for my part : punished, though
By a pin-point scratch, means guilty : guilty means
—What have I been but innocent hitherto ?
Anyhow, here the offence, being punished, ends.

Ends ?—for you deemed so, did you not, sweet
lords ? 1940

That was throughout the veritable aim
O' the sentence light or heavy,—to redress
Recognized wrong ? You righted me, I think ?
Well then,—what if I, at this last of all,
Demonstrate you, as my whole pleading proves, 1945
No particle of wrong received thereby
One atom of right?—that cure grew worse disease ?
That in the process you call “justice done”
All along you have nipped away just inch
By inch the creeping climbing length of plague 1950
Breaking my tree of life from root to branch,
And left me, after all and every act
Of your interference,—lightened of what load ?
At liberty wherein ? Mere words and wind !
“Now I was saved, now I should feel no more
“The hot breath, find a respite from fixed eye
“And vibrant tongue !” Why, scarce your back
was turned,
There was the reptile, that feigned death at first,

Renewing its detested spire and spire
 Around me, rising to such heights of hate 1960
 That, so far from mere purpose now to crush
 And coil itself on the remains of me,
 Body and mind, and there flesh fang content,
 Its aim is now to evoke life from death,
 Make me anew, satisfy in my son 1965
 The hunger I may feed but never sate,
 Tormented on to perpetuity,—
 My son, whom, dead, I shall know, understand,
 Feel, hear, see, never more escape the sight
 In heaven that's turned to hell, or hell returned 1970
 (So rather say) to this same earth again,—
 Moulded into the image and made one,
 Fashioned of soul as featured like in face,
 First taught to laugh and lisp and stand and go
 By that thief, poisoner and adulteress 1975
 I call Pompilia, he calls . . . sacred name,
 Be unpronounced, be unpolluted here !
 And last led up to the glory and prize of hate
 By his . . . foster-father, Caponsacchi's self,
 The perjured priest, pink of conspirators, 1980
 Tricksters and knaves, yet polished, superfine,
 Manhood to model adolescence by !
 Lords, look on me, declare,—when, what I show,
 Is nothing more nor less than what you deemed
 And doled me out for justice,—what did you say ? 1985
 For reparation, restitution and more,—
 Will you not thank, praise, bid me to your breasts
 For having done the thing you thought to do,
 And thoroughly trampled out sin's life at last ?
 I have heightened phrase to make your soft speech
 serve, 1990
 Doubled the blow you but essayed to strike,
 Carried into effect your mandate here
 That else had fallen to ground : mere duty done,

Oversight of the master just supplied
 By zeal i' the servant. I, being used to serve, 1995
 Have simply . . . what is it they charge me with ?
 Blackened again, made legible once more
 Your own decree, not permanently writ,
 Rightly conceived but all too faintly traced.
 It reads efficient, now, comminatory,
 A terror to the wicked, answers so 2000
 The mood o' the magistrate, the mind of law.
 Absolve, then, me, law's mere executant !
 Protect your own defender,—save me, Sirs !
 Give me my life, give me my liberty,
 My good name and my civic rights again ! 2005
 It would be too fond, too complacent play
 Into the hands o' the devil, should we lose
 The game here, I for God : a soldier-bee
 That yields his life, exenterate with the stroke 2010
 O' the sting that saves the hive. I need that life.
 Oh, never fear ! I 'll find life plenty use
 Though it should last five years more, aches and
 all !
 For, first thing, there 's the mother's age to help—
 Let her come break her heart upon my breast,
 Not on the blank stone of my nameless tomb ! 2015
 The fugitive brother has to be bidden back
 To the old routine, repugnant to the tread,
 Of daily suit and service to the Church,—
 Thro' gibe and jest, those stones that Shimei flung ! 2020
 Ay, and the spirit-broken youth at home,
 The awe-struck altar-ministrant, shall make
 Amends for faith now palsied at the source,
 Shall see truth yet triumphant, justice yet
 A victor in the battle of this world !
 Give me—for last, best gift—my son again,
 Whom law makes mine,—I take him at your word,
 Mine be he, by miraculous mercy, lords ! 2025

BOOK V COUNT GUIDO FRANCESCHINI

Let me lift up his youth and innocence

To purify my palace, room by room

2030

Purged of the memories, lend from his bright brow

Light to the old proud paladin my sire

Shrunk now for shame into the darkest shade

O' the tapestry, showed him once and shrouds
him now !

Then may we,—strong from that rekindled smile,— 2035

Go forward, face new times, the better day.

And when, in times made better through your brave
Decision now,—might but Utopia be !—

Rome rife with honest women and strong men,

2040

Manners reformed, old habits back once more,

Customs that recognize the standard worth,—

The wholesome household rule in force again,

Husbands once more God's representative,

Wives like the typical Spouse once more, and Priests

No longer men of Belial, with no aim

2045

At leading silly women captive, but

Of rising to such duties as yours now,—

Then will I set my son at my right-hand

And tell his father's story to this point,

Adding "The task seemed superhuman, still

2050

"I dared and did it, trusting God and law :

"And they approved of me : give praise to both !"

And if, for answer, he shall stoop to kiss

My hand, and peradventure start thereat,—

I engage to smile "That was an accident

2055

"I' the necessary process,—just a trip

"O' the torture-irons in their search for truth,—

"Hardly misfortune, and no fault at all."

VI.—GIUSEPPE CAPONSACCHI

ANSWER you, Sirs? Do I understand aright?
Have patience! In this sudden smoke from hell,—
So things disguise themselves,—I cannot see
My own hand held thus broad before my face
And know it again. Answer you? Then that
means

Tell over twice what I, the first time, told
Six months ago: 't was here, I do believe,
Fronting you same three in this very room,
I stood and told you: yet now no one laughs,
Who then . . . nay, dear my lords, but laugh
you did,

As good as laugh, what in a judge we style
Laughter—no levity, nothing indecorous, lords!
Only,—I think I apprehend the mood:
There was the blameless shrug, permissible smirk,
The pen's pretence at play with the pursed mouth, 15
The titter stifled in the hollow palm
Which rubbed the eyebrow and caressed the nose,
When I first told my tale: they meant, you know,
"The sly one, all this we are bound believe!"
"Well, he can say no other than what he says." 20
"We have been young, too,—come, there 's
greater guilt!"
"Let him but decently disemboil himself,
"Scramble from out the scrape nor move the
mud,—
"We solid ones may risk a finger-stretch!"
And now you sit as grave, stare as aghast

As if I were a phantom : now 't is—" Friend,
 "Collect yourself!"—no laughing matter more—
 "Counsel the Court in this extremity,
 "Tell us again!"—tell that, for telling which,
 I got the jocular piece of punishment,

30

Was sent to lounge a little in the place

Whence now of a sudden here you summon me
 To take the intelligence from just—your lips !

35

You, Judge Tommati, who then tittered most,—
 That she I helped eight months since to escape

Her husband, was retaken by the same,

35

Three days ago, if I have seized your sense,—
 (I being disallowed to interfere,

Meddle or make in a matter none of mine,

40

For you and law were guardians quite enough
 O' the innocent, without a pert priest's help)—

And that he has butchered her accordingly,

As she foretold and as myself believed,—

And, so foretelling and believing so,

45

We were punished, both of us, the merry way :

Therefore, tell once again the tale ! For what ?

Pompilia is only dying while I speak !

Why does the mirth hang fire and miss the smile ?

My masters, there 's an old book, you should con

50

For strange adventures, applicable yet,

'T is stuffed with. Do you know that there was
 once

This thing : a multitude of worthy folk

Took recreation, watched a certain group

Of soldiery intent upon a game,—

55

How first they wrangled, but soon fell to play,

Threw dice,—the best diversion in the world.

A word in your ear,—they are now casting lots,

Ay, with that gesture quaint and cry uncouth,

For the coat of One murdered an hour ago !

I am a priest,—talk of what I have learned.

60

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK VI

Pompilia is bleeding out her life belike,
 Gasp^{ing} away the latest breath of all,
 This minute, while I talk—not while you laugh ?

Yet, being sobered now, what is it you ask
 By way of explanation ? There 's the fact ! 65
 It seems to fill the universe with sight
 And sound,—from the four corners of this earth
 Tells itself over, to my sense at least.
 But you may want it lower set i' the scale,—
 Too vast, too close it clangs in the ear, perhaps ; 70
 You 'd stand back just to comprehend it more.
 Well then, let me, the hollow rock, condense
 The voice o' the sea and wind, interpret you
 The mystery of this murder. God above !
 It is too paltry, such a transference
 O' the storm's roar to the cranny of the stone ! 75

This deed, you saw begin—why does its end
 Surprise you ? Why should the event enforce
 The lesson, we ourselves learned, she and I,
 From the first o' the fact, and taught you, all in
 vain ? 80

This Guido from whose throat you took my grasp,
 Was this man to be favoured, now, or feared,
 Let do his will, or have his will restrained,
 In the relation with Pompilia ? Say !
 Did any other man need interpose
 —Oh, though first comer, though as strange at 85
 the work
 As fribble must be, coxcomb, fool that 's near
 To knave as, say, a priest who fears the world—
 Was he bound brave the peril, save the doomed,
 Or go on, sing his snatch and pluck his flower,
 Keep the straight path and let the victim die ? 90
 I held so ; you decided otherwise,

Saw no such peril, therefore no such need
 To stop song, loosen flower, and leave path. Law,
 Law was aware and watching, would suffice,
 Wanted no priest's intrusion, palpably
 Pretence, too manifest a subterfuge !

Whereupon I, priest, coxcomb, fribble and fool,
 Ensconced me in my corner, thus rebuked,
 A kind of culprit, over-zealous hound
 Kicked for his pains to kennel ; I gave place
 To you, and let the law reign paramount :
 I left Pompilia to your watch and ward,
 And now you point me—there and thus she lies !

Men, for the last time, what do you want with me ? 105
 Is it,—you acknowledge, as it were, a use,
 A profit in employing me ?—at length
 I may conceivably help the august law ?
 I am free to break the blow, next hawk that
 swoops

On next dove, nor miss much of good repute ? 110
 Or what if this your summons, after all,
 Be but the form of mere release, no more,
 Which turns the key and lets the captive go ?
 I have paid enough in person at Civita,
 Am free,—what more need I concern me with ? 115
 Thank you ! I am rehabilitated then,
 A very reputable priest. But she—
 The glory of life, the beauty of the world,
 The splendour of heaven, . . . well, Sirs, does
 no one move ?

Do I speak ambiguously ? The glory, I say,
 And the beauty, I say, and splendour, still say I,
 Who, priest and trained to live my whole life long
 On beauty and splendour, solely at their source,
 God,—have thus recognized my food in her,
 You tell me, that 's fast dying while we talk,

95

100

105

110

115

120

125

Pompilia ! How does lenity to me,
 Remit one death-bed pang to her ? Come, smile !
 The proper wink at the hot-headed youth
 Who lets his soul show, through transparent words,
 The mundane love that 's sin and scandal too ! 130
 You are all struck acquiescent now, it seems :
 It seems the oldest, gravest signor here,
 Even the redoubtable Tommati, sits
 Chop-fallen,—understands how law might take
 Service like mine, of brain and heart and hand, 135
 In good part. Better late than never, law
 You understand of a sudden, gospel too
 Has a claim here, may possibly pronounce
 Consistent with my priesthood, worthy Christ,
 That I endeavoured to save Pompilia ? 140

Then,
 You were wrong, you see : that 's well to see,
 though late :

That 's all we may expect of man, this side
 The grave : his good is—knowing he is bad :
 Thus will it be with us when the books ope 145
 And we stand at the bar on judgment-day.
 Well then, I have a mind to speak, see cause
 To relume the quenched flax by this dreadful light,
 Burn my soul out in showing you the truth.
 I heard, last time I stood here to be judged, 150
 What is priest's-duty,—labour to pluck tares
 And weed the corn of Molinism ; let me
 Make you hear, this time, how, in such a case,
 Man, be he in the priesthood or at plough,
 Mindful of Christ or marching step by step 155
 With . . . what 's his style, the other potentate
 Who bids have courage and keep honour safe,
 Nor let minuter admonition tease ?—
 How he is bound, better or worse, to act.

Earth will not end through this misjudgment, no ! 160
 For you and the others like you sure to come,
 Fresh work is sure to follow,—wickedness
 That wants notwithstanding. Many a man of blood,
 Many a man of guile will clamour yet,
 Bid you redress his grievance,—as he clutched 165
 The prey, forsooth a stranger stepped between,
 And there 's the good gripe in pure waste ! My
 part

Is done ; i' the doing it, I pass away
 Out of the world. I want no more with earth.
 Let me, in heaven's name, use the very snuff 170
 O' the taper in one last spark shall show truth
 For a moment, show Pompilia who was true !
 Not for her sake, but yours : if she is dead,
 Oh, Sirs, she can be loved by none of you
 Most or least priestly ! Saints, to do us good, 175
 Must be in heaven, I seem to understand :
 We never find them saints before, at least.
 Be her first prayer then presently for you—
 She has done the good to me . . .

What is all this ? 180
 There, I was born, have lived, shall die, a fool !
 This is a foolish outset :—might with cause
 Give colour to the very lie o' the man,
 The murderer,—make as if I loved his wife,
 In the way he called love. He is the fool there ! 185
 Why, had there been in me the touch of taint,
 I had picked up so much of knaves'-policy
 As hide it, keep one hand pressed on the place
 Suspected of a spot would damn us both.
 Or no, not her !—not even if any of you 190
 Dares think that I, i' the face of death, her death
 That 's in my eyes and ears and brain and heart,
 Lie,—if he does, let him ! I mean to say,
 So he stop there, stay thought from smirching her

The snow-white soul that angels fear to take
 Untenderly. But, all the same, I know
 I too am taintless, and I bare my breast.
 You can't think, men as you are, all of you,
 But that, to hear thus suddenly such an end
 Of such a wonderful white soul, that comes
 Of a man and murderer calling the white black,
 Must shake me, trouble and disadvantage. Sirs,
 Only seventeen !

Why, good and wise you are !
 You might at the beginning stop my mouth :
 So, none would be to speak for her, that knew.
 I talk impertinently, and you bear,
 All the same. This it is to have to do
 With honest hearts : they easily may err,
 But in the main they wish well to the truth.
 You are Christians ; somehow, no one ever plucked
 A rag, even, from the body of the Lord,
 To wear and mock with, but, despite himself,
 He looked the greater and was the better. Yes,
 I shall go on now. Does she need or not
 I keep calm ? Calm I 'll keep as monk that croons
 Transcribing battle, earthquake, famine, plague,
 From parchment to his cloister's chronicle.
 Not one word more from the point now !

I begin. 220
 Yes, I am one of your body and a priest.
 Also I am a younger son o' the House
 Oldest now, greatest once, in my birth-town
 Arezzo, I recognize no equal there—
 (I want all arguments, all sorts of arms
 That seem to serve,—use this for a reason, wait !)
 Not therefore thrust into the Church, because
 O' the piece of bread one gets there. We were first
 Of Fiesole, that rings still with the fame

Of Capo-in-Sacco our progenitor :
 When Florence ruined Fiesole, our folk
 Migrated to the victor-city, and there
 Flourished,—our palace and our tower attest,
 In the Old Mercato,—this was years ago,
 Four hundred, full,—no, it wants fourteen just. 230
 Our arms are those of Fiesole itself,
 The shield quartered with white and red: a branch
 Are the Salviata of us, nothing more.
 That were good help to the Church? But better
 still—

Not simply for the advantage of my birth 240
 I' the way of the world, was I proposed for priest;
 But because there 's an illustration, late
 I' the day, that 's loved and looked to as a saint
 Still in Arezzo, he was bishop of,
 Sixty years since: he spent to the last doit 245
 His bishop's-revenue among the poor,
 And used to tend the needy and the sick,
 Barefoot, because of his humility.
 He it was,—when the Granduke Ferdinand
 Swore he would raze our city, plough the place 250
 And sow it with salt, because we Aretines
 Had tied a rope about the neck, to hale
 The statue of his father from its base
 For hate's sake,—he availed by prayers and tears
 To pacify the Duke and save the town. 255
 This was my father's father's brother. You see,
 For his sake, how it was I had a right
 To the self-same office, bishop in the egg,
 So, grew i' the garb and prattled in the school,
 Was made expect, from infancy almost, 260
 The proper mood o' the priest; till time ran by
 And brought the day when I must read the vows,
 Declare the world renounced and undertake
 To become priest and leave probation,—leap

Over the ledge into the other life,
Having gone trippingly hitherto up to the height
O'er the wan water. Just a vow to read !

I stopped short awe-struck. "How shall holiest
flesh

"Engage to keep such vow inviolate,
"How much less mine? I know myself too weak,

"Unworthy! Choose a worthier stronger man!"

And the very Bishop smiled and stopped my mouth
In its mid-protestation. "Incapable?

"Qualmish of conscience? Thou ingenuous boy!

"Clear up the clouds and cast thy scruples far!

"I satisfy thee there 's an easier sense

"Wherein to take such vow than suits the first

"Rough rigid reading. Mark what makes all
smooth,

"Nay, has been even a solace to myself!

"The Jews who needs must, in their synagogue,

"Utter sometimes the holy name of God,

"A thing their superstition boggles at,

"Pronounce aloud the ineffable sacrosanct,—

"How does their shrewdness help them? In this
wise;

"Another set of sounds they substitute,

"Jumble so consonants and vowels—how

"Should I know?—that there grows from out the
old

"Quite a new word that means the very same—

"And o'er the hard place slide they with a smile.

"Giuseppe Maria Caponsacchi mine,

"Nobody wants you in these latter days

"To prop the Church by breaking your back-
bone,—

"As the necessary way was once, we know,

"When Diocletian flourished and his like.

265

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“That building of the buttress-work was done 295
 “By martyrs and confessors : let it bide,
 “Add not a brick, but, where you see a chink,
 “Stick in a sprig of ivy or root a rose
 “Shall make amends and beautify the pile !
 “We profit as you were the painfullest 300
 “O’ the martyrs, and you prove yourself a match
 “For the cruelest confessor ever was,
 “If you march boldly up and take your stand
 “Where their blood soaks, their bones yet strew
 the soil,
 “And cry ‘Take notice, I the young and free 305
 “‘ And well-to-do i’ the world, thus leave the world,
 “‘ Cast in my lot thus with no gay young world
 “‘ But the grand old Church : she tempts me of
 the two !’
 “Renounce the world? Nay, keep and give it us !
 “Let us have you, and boast of what you bring. 310
 “We want the pick o’ the earth to practise with,
 “Not its offscouring, halt and deaf and blind
 “In soul and body. There’s a rubble-stone
 “Unfit for the front o’ the building, stuff to stow
 “In a gap behind and keep us weather-tight ; 315
 “There’s porphyry for the prominent place.
 Good luck !
 “Saint Paul has had enough and to spare, I trow,
 “Of ragged run-away Onesimus :
 “He wants the right-hand with the signet-ring
 “Of King Agrippa, now, to shake and use. 320
 “I have a heavy scholar cloistered up,
 “Close under lock and key, kept at his task
 “Of letting Fénelon know the fool he is,
 “In a book I promise Christendom next Spring.
 “Why, if he covets so much meat, the clown, 325
 “As a lark’s wing next Friday, or, any day,
 “Diversion beyond catching his own fleas,

“ He shall be properly swinged, I promise him.
 “ But you, who are so quite another paste
 “ Of a man,—do you obey me? Cultivate 330
 “ Assiduous that superior gift you have
 “ Of making madrigals—(who told me? Ah !)
 “ Get done a Marinesque Adoniad straight
 “ With a pulse o’ the blood a-pricking, here and
 there,
 “ That I may tell the lady ‘ And he ’s ours ! ’ ” 335

So I became a priest: those terms changed all,
 I was good enough for that, nor cheated so ;
 I could live thus and still hold head erect.
 Now you see why I may have been before
 A fribble and coxcomb, yet, as priest, break word 340
 Nowise, to make you disbelieve me now.
 I need that you should know my truth. Well, then,
 According to prescription did I live,
 —Conformed myself, both read the breviary
 And wrote the rhymes, was punctual to my place 345
 I’ the Pieve, and as diligent at my post
 Where beauty and fashion rule. I throve apace,
 Sub-deacon, Canon, the authority
 For delicate play at tarocs, and arbiter
 O’ the magnitude of fan-mounts: all the while 350
 Wanting no whit the advantage of a hint
 Benignant to the promising pupil,—thus :
 “ Enough attention to the Countess now,
 “ The young one; ’t is her mother rules the roast,
 “ We know where, and puts in a word: go pay 355
 “ Devoir to-morrow morning after mass!
 “ Break that rash promise to preach, Passion-week!
 “ Has it escaped you the Archbishop grunts
 “ And snuffles when one grieves to tell his Grace
 “ No soul dares treat the subject of the day 360
 “ Since his own masterly handling it (ha, ha !)

“ Five years ago,—when somebody could help
 “ And touch up an odd phrase in time of need,
 “ (He, he !)—and somebody helps you, my son !
 “ Therefore, don’t prove so indispensable 365
 “ At the Pieve, sit more loose i’ the seat, nor
 grow
 “ A fixture by attendance morn and eve !
 “ Arezzo ’s just a haven midway Rome—
 “ Rome ’s the eventual harbour,—make for port,
 “ Crowd sail, crack cordage ! And your cargo be 370
 “ A polished presence, a genteel manner, wit
 “ At will, and tact at every pore of you !
 “ I sent our lump of learning, Brother Clout,
 “ And Father Slouch, our piece of piety,
 “ To see Rome and try suit the Cardinal. 375
 “ Thither they clump-clumped, beads and book
 in hand,
 “ And ever since ’t is meat for man and maid
 “ How both flopped down, prayed blessing on
 bent pate
 “ Bald many an inch beyond the tonsure’s need,
 “ Never once dreaming, the two moony dolts, 380
 “ There ’s nothing moves his Eminence so much
 “ As—far from all this awe at sanctitude—
 “ Heads that wag, eyes that twinkle, modified
 mirth
 “ At the closet-lectures on the Latin tongue
 “ A lady learns so much by, we know where. 385
 “ Why, body o’ Bacchus, you should crave his
 rule
 “ For pauses in the elegiac couplet, chasms
 “ Permissible only to Catullus ! There !
 “ Now go to duty : brisk, break Priscian’s head
 “ By reading the day’s office—there ’s no help. 390
 “ You ’ve Ovid in your poke to plaster that ;
 “ Amen ’s at the end of all : then sup with me !”

Well, after three or four years of this life,
 In prosecution of my calling, I
 Found myself at the theatre one night 395
 With a brother Canon, in a mood and mind
 Proper enough for the place, amused or no :
 When I saw enter, stand, and seat herself
 A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad.
 It was as when, in our cathedral once,
 As I got yawningly through matin-song, 400
 I saw *facchini* bear a burden up,
 Base it on the high-altar, break away
 A board or two, and leave the thing inside
 Lofty and lone : and lo, when next I looked, 405
 There was the Rafael ! I was still one stare,
 When—"Nay, I 'll make her give you back your
 gaze"—

Said Canon Conti ; and at the word he tossed
 A paper-twist of comfits to her lap,
 And dodged and in a trice was at my back
 Nodding from over my shoulder. Then she 410
 turned,
 Looked our way, smiled the beautiful sad strange
 smile.

"Is not she fair ? 'T is my new cousin," said
 he :

"The fellow lurking there i' the black o' the box
 "Is Guido, the old scapegrace : she 's his wife,
 "Married three years since : how his Countship 415
 sulks !

"He has brought little back from Rome beside,
 "After the bragging, bullying. A fair face,
 "And—they do say—a pocketful of gold
 "When he can worry both her parents dead.
 "I don't go much there, for the chamber 's cold
 "And the coffee pale. I got a turn at first
 "Paying my duty : I observed they crouched

“—The two old frightened family spectres—close
 “In a corner, each on each like mouse on mouse 425
 “I’ the cat’s cage : ever since, I stay at home.
 “Hallo, there’s Guido, the black, mean and small,
 “Bends his brows on us—please to bend your own
 “On the shapely nether limbs of Light-skirts there
 “By way of a diversion ! I was a fool 430
 “To fling the sweetmeats. Prudence, for God’s
 love !
 “To-morrow I ’ll make my peace, e’en tell somefib,
 “Try if I can’t find means to take you there.”

That night and next day did the gaze endure,
 Burnt to my brain, as sunbeam thro’ shut eyes, 435
 And not once changed the beautiful sad strange
 smile.

At vespers Conti leaned beside my seat
 I’ the choir,—part said, part sung—“*In ex-cel-sis*—
 “All ’s to no purpose ; I have louted low,
 “But he saw you staring—*quia sub*—don’t incline 440
 “To know you nearer : him we would not hold
 “For Hercules,—the man would lick your shoe
 “If you and certain efficacious friends
 “Managed him warily,—but there ’s the wife :
 “Spare her, because he beats her, as it is, 445
 “She ’s breaking her heart quite fast enough—
jam tu—
 “So, be you rational and make amends
 “With little Light-skirts yonder—*in secula*
 “*Secu-lo-o-o-o-rum*. Ah, you rogue ! Every one
 knows
 “What great dame she makes jealous : one against
 one, 450
 “Play, and win both !”
 Sirs, ere the week was out,
 I saw and said to myself “Light-skirts hides teeth

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK VI

“Would make a dog sick,—the great dame shows
spite

“Should drive a cat mad: ’t is but poor work this— 455

“Counting one’s fingers till the sonnet’s crowned.

“I doubt much if Marino really be

“A better bard than Dante after all.

“’T is more amusing to go pace at eve

“I’ the Duomo,—watch the day’s last gleam out-
side 460

“Turn, as into a skirt of God’s own robe,

“Those lancet-windows’ jewelled miracle,—

“Than go eat the Archbishop’s ortolans,

“Digest his jokes. Luckily Lent is near :

“Who cares to look will find me in my stall 465

“At the Pieve, constant to this faith at least—

“Never to write a canzonet any more.”

So, next week, ’t was my patron spoke abrupt,
In altered guise. “Young man, can it be true

“That after all your promise of sound fruit, 470

“You have kept away from Countess young or old

“And gone play truant in church all day long ?

“Are you turning Molinist ?” I answered quick:

“Sir, what if I turned Christian ? It might be.

“The fact is, I am troubled in my mind, 475

“Beset and pressed hard by some novel thoughts.

“This your Arezzo is a limited world ;

“There’s a strange Pope,—’t is said, a priest
who thinks.

“Rome is the port, you say : to Rome I go.

“I will live alone, one does so in a crowd, 480

“And look into my heart a little.” “Lent

“Ended,”—I told friends—“I shall go to Rome.”

One evening I was sitting in a muse
Over the opened “Summa,” darkened round

By the mid-March twilight, thinking how my life 485
 Had shaken under me,—broke short indeed
 And showed the gap 'twixt what is, what should
 be,—

And into what abyss the soul may slip,
 Leave aspiration here, achievement there,
 Lacking omnipotence to connect extremes— 490
 Thinking moreover . . . oh, thinking, if you like,
 How utterly dissociated was I
 A priest and celibate, from the sad strange wife
 Of Guido,—just as an instance to the point,
 Nought more,—how I had a whole store of
 strengths 495

Eating into my heart, which craved employ,
 And she, perhaps, need of a finger's help,—
 And yet there was no way in the wide world
 To stretch out mine and so relieve myself,—
 How when the page o' the Summa preached its best, 500
 Her smile kept glowing out of it, as to mock
 The silence we could break by no one word,—
 There came a tap without the chamber-door,
 And a whisper; when I bade who tapped speak out,
 And, in obedience to my summons, last 505
 In glided a masked muffled mystery,
 Laid lightly a letter on the opened book,
 Then stood with folded arms and foot demure,
 Pointing as if to mark the minutes' flight.

I took the letter, read to the effect
 That she, I lately flung the comfits to, 510
 Had a warm heart to give me in exchange,
 And gave it,—loved me and confessed it thus,
 And bade me render thanks by word of mouth,
 Going that night to such a side o' the house 515
 Where the small terrace overhangs a street
 Blind and deserted, not the street in front:

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Her husband being away, the surly patch,
At his villa of Vittiano.

“And you?”—I asked : 520
“What may you be?” “Count Guido’s kind of
maid—
“Most of us have two functions in his house.
“We all hate him, the lady suffers much,
“T is just we show compassion, furnish help,
“Specially since her choice is fixed so well. 525
“What answer may I bring to cheer the sweet
“Pompilia?”

Then I took a pen and wrote :
“No more of this! That you are fair, I know :
“But other thoughts now occupy my mind. 530
“I should not thus have played the insensible
“Once on a time. What made you,—may one
ask,—
“Marry your hideous husband? ‘T was a fault,
“And now you taste the fruit of it. Farewell.”

“There!” smiled I as she snatched it and was
gone— 535

“There, let the jealous miscreant,—Guido’s self,
“Whose mean soul grins through this transparent
trick,—

“Be baulked so far, defrauded of his aim!
“What fund of satisfaction to the knave,
“Had I kicked this his messenger down stairs, 540
“Trussed to the middle of her impudence,
“And set his heart at ease so! No, indeed!
“There’s the reply which he shall turn and twist
“At pleasure, snuff at till his brain grow drunk,
“As the bear does when he finds a scented glove 545
“That puzzles him,—a hand and yet no hand,

“Of other perfume than his own foul paw !

“Last month, I had doubtless chosen to play the dupe,

“Accepted the mock-invitation, kept

“The sham appointment, cudgel beneath cloak, 550

“Prepared myself to pull the appointer’s self

“Out of the window from his hiding-place

“Behind the gown of this part-messenger

“Part-mistress who would personate the wife.

“Such had seemed once a jest permissible : 555

“Now I am not i’ the mood.”

Back next morn brought
The messenger, a second letter in hand.

“You are cruel, Thyrsis, and Myrtilla moans

“Neglected but adores you, makes request 560

“For mercy : why is it you dare not come ?

“Such virtue is scarce natural to your age.

“You must love someone else ; I hear you do,

“The Baron’s daughter or the Advocate’s wife,

“Or both,—all ’s one, would you make me the
third— 565

“I take the crumbs from table gratefully

“Nor grudge who feasts there. ’Faith, I blush
and blaze !

“Yet if I break all bounds, there ’s reason sure.

“Are you determinedly bent on Rome ?

“I am wretched here, a monster tortures me : 570

“Carry me with you ! Come and say you will !

“Concert this very evening ! Do not write !

“I am ever at the window of my room

“Over the terrace, at the *Ave.* Come !”

I questioned—lifting half the woman’s mask

To let her smile loose. “So, you gave my line

“To the merry lady ?” “She kissed off the wax,

“And put what paper was not kissed away,

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“In her bosom to go burn : but merry, no !

“She wept all night when evening brought no friend,

“Alone, the unkind missive at her breast ;

“Thus Philomel, the thorn at her breast too,

“Sings . . . “ Writes this second letter ?”
“Even so !

“Then she may peep at vespers forth ?”—“What risk

“Do we run o’ the husband ?”—“Ah,—no risk at all !

“He is more stupid even than jealous. Ah—

“That was the reason ? Why, the man ’s away !

“Beside, his bugbear is that friend of yours,

“Fat little Canon Conti. He fears him,

“How should he dream of you ? I told you truth : 590

“He goes to the villa at Vittiano—’t is

“The time when Spring-sap rises in the vine—

“Spends the night there. And then his wife ’s a child :

“Does he think a child outwits him ? A mere child :

“Yet so full grown, a dish for any duke.

“Don’t quarrel longer with such cates, but come !”

I wrote “In vain do you solicit me.

“I am a priest : and you are wedded wife,

“Whatever kind of brute your husband prove.

“I have scruples, in short. Yet should you really show

“Sign at the window . . . but nay, best be good !

“My thoughts are elsewhere.” “Take her that !”
“Again

“Let the incarnate meanness, cheat and spy,

“Mean to the marrow of him, make his heart

“His food, anticipate hell’s worm once more !

“Let him watch shivering at the window—ay,

580

585

595

600

605

“And let this hybrid, this his light-of-love

“And lackey-of-lies,—a sage economy,—

“Paid with embracings for the rank brass coin,— 610

“Let her report and make him chuckle o'er

“The break-down of my resolution now,

“And lour at disappointment in good time !

“—So tantalize and so enrage by turns,

“Until the two fall each on the other like 615

“Two famished spiders, as the coveted fly

“That toys long, leaves their net and them atlast !”

And so the missives followed thick and fast

For a month, say,—I still came at every turn

On the soft sly adder, endlong 'neath my tread. 620

I was met i' the street, made sign to in the church,

A slip was found i' the door-sill, scribbled word

‘Twixt page and page o' the prayer-book in my
place.

A crumpled thing dropped even before my feet,

Pushed through the blind, above the terrace-rail, 625

As I passed, by day, the very window once.

And ever from corners would be peering up

The messenger, with the self-same demand

“Obdurate still, no flesh but adamant ?

“Nothing to cure the wound, assuage the throe 630

“O' the sweetest lamb that ever loved a bear ?”

And ever my one answer in one tone—

“Go your ways, temptress ! Let a priestread, pray,

“Unplagued of vain talk, visions not for him !

“In the end, you 'll have your will and ruin me !” 635

One day, a variation : thus I read :

“You have gained little by timidity.

“My husband has found out my love at length,

“Sees cousin Conti was the stalking-horse,

“And you the game he covered, poor fat soul !

“My husband is a formidable foe,

640

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“ Will stick at nothing to destroy you. Stand
 “ Prepared, or better, run till you reach Rome !
 “ I bade you visit me, when the last place
 “ My tyrant would have turned suspicious at, 645
 “ Or cared to seek you in, was . . . why say,
 where ?
 “ But now all 's changed : beside, the season 's past
 “ At the villa,—wants the master's eye no more.
 “ Anyhow, I beseech you, stay away
 “ From the window ! He might well be posted
 there.” 650

I wrote—“ You raise my courage, or call up
 “ My curiosity, who am but man.
 “ Tell him he owns the palace, not the street
 “ Under—that 's his and yours and mine alike.
 “ If it should please me pad the path this eve, 655
 “ Guido will have two troubles, first to get
 “ Into a rage and then get out again.
 “ Be cautious, though : at the *Ave!*”

You of the Court !

When I stood question here and reached this point 660
 O' the narrative,—search notes and see and say
 If someone did not interpose with smile
 And sneer, “ And prithee why so confident
 “ That the husband must, of all needs, not the wife,
 “ Fabricate thus,—what if the lady loved ? 665
 “ What if she wrote the letters ?”

Learned Sir,

I told you there 's a picture in our church.
 Well, if a low-browed verger sidled up
 Bringing me, like a blotch, on his prod's point, 670
 A transfixed scorpion, let the reptile writhe,
 And then said “ See a thing that Rafael made—
 “ This venom issued from Madonna's mouth !”
 I should reply, “ Rather, the soul of you

“Has issued from your body, like from like,
“By way of the ordure-corner !”

675

But no less,
I tired of the same long black teasing lie
Obtruded thus at every turn ; the pest
Was far too near the picture, anyhow : 680
One does Madonna service, making clowns
Remove their dung-heap from the sacristy.
“I will to the window, as he tempts,” said I :
“Yes, whom the easy love has failed allure,
“This new bait of adventure tempts,—thinks he. 685
“Though the imprisoned lady keeps afar,
“There will they lie in ambush, heads alert,
“Kith, kin, and Count mustered to bite my heel.
“No mother nor brother viper of the brood
“Shall scuttle off without the instructive bruise !” 690

So I went : crossed street and street : “The next
street’s turn,
“I stand beneath the terrace, see, above,
“The black of the ambush-window. Then, in place
“Of hand’s throw of soft prelude over lute,
“And cough that clears way for the ditty last,”— 695
I began to laugh already—“he will have
“‘Out of the hole you hide in, on to the front,
“‘Count Guido Franceschini, show yourself !
“‘Hear what a man thinks of a thing like you,
“‘And after, take this foulness in your face !” 700

The words lay living on my lip, I made
The one-turn more—and there at the window stood,
Framed in its black square length, with lamp in
hand,

Pompilia ; the same great, grave, grievful air
As stands i’ the dusk, on altar that I know, 705
Left alone with one moonbeam in her cell,

Our Lady of all the Sorrows. Ere I knelt—
Assured myself that she was flesh and blood—
She had looked one look and vanished.

I thought—“Just so : 710

“It was herself, they have set her there to watch—
“Stationed to see some wedding-band go by,
“On fair pretence that she must bless the bride,
“Or wait some funeral with friends wind past,
“And crave peace for the corpse that claims its
due. 715

“She never dreams they used her for a snare,
“And now withdraw the bait has served its turn.
“Well done, the husband, who shall fare the
worse !”

And on my lip again was—“Out with thee,
“Guido !” When all at once she re-appeared ; 720
But, this time, on the terrace overhead,
So close above me, she could almost touch
My head if she bent down ; and she did bend,
While I stood still as stone, all eye, all ear.

She began—“You have sent me letters, Sir : 725
“I have read none, I can neither read nor write ;
“But she you gave them to, a woman here,
“One of the people in whose power I am,
“Partly explained their sense, I think, to me
“Obliged to listen while she inculcates 730
“That you, a priest, can dare love me, a wife,
“Desire to live or die as I shall bid,
“(She makes me listen if I will or no)
“Because you saw my face a single time.
“It cannot be she says the thing you mean ; 735
“Such wickedness were deadly to us both :
“But good true love would help me now so much—
“I tell myself, you may mean good and true.
“You offer me, I seem to understand,

“Because I am in poverty and starve, 740

“Much money, where one piece would save my life.

“The silver cup upon the altar-cloth

“Is neither yours to give nor mine to take ;

“But I might take one bit of bread therefrom,

“Since I am starving, and return the rest, 745

“Yet do no harm : this is my very case.

“I am in that strait, I may not dare abstain

“From so much of assistance as would bring

“The guilt of theft on neither you nor me ;

“But no superfluous particle of aid. 750

“I think, if you will let me state my case,

“Even had you been so fancy-fevered here,

“Not yoursound self, you must grow healthy now—

“Care only to bestow what I can take.

“That it is only you in the wide world, 755

“Knowing me nor in thought nor word nor deed,

“Who, all unprompted save by your own heart,

“Come proffering assistance now,—were strange

“But that my whole life is so strange : as strange

“It is, my husband whom I have not wronged 760

“Should hate and harm me. For his own soul’s sake,

“Hinder the harm ! But there is something more,

“And that the strangest : it has got to be

“Somehow for my sake too, and yet not mine,

“—This is a riddle—for some kind of sake 765

“Not any clearer to myself than you,

“And yet as certain as that I draw breath,—

“I would fain live, not die—oh no, not die !

“My case is, I was dwelling happily

“At Rome with those dear Comparini, called 770

“Father and mother to me ; when at once

“I found I had become Count Guido’s wife :

“Who then, not waiting for a moment, changed

" Into a fury of fire, if once he was
 " Merely a man : his face threw fire at mine, 775
 " He laid a hand on me that burned all peace,
 " All joy, all hope, and last all fear away,
 " Dipping the bough of life, so pleasant once,
 " In fire which shrivelled leaf and bud alike,
 " Burning not only present life but past, 780
 " Which you might think was safe beyond his
 reach.
 " He reached it, though, since that beloved pair,
 " My father once, my mother all those years,
 " That loved me so, now say I dreamed a dream
 " And bid me wake, henceforth no child of theirs, 785
 " Never in all the time their child at all.
 " Do you understand ? I cannot : yet so it is.
 " Just so I say of you that proffer help :
 " I cannot understand what prompts your soul,
 " I simply needs must see that it is so, 790
 " Only one strange and wonderful thing more.
 " They came here with me, those two dear ones,
 kept
 " All the old love up, till my husband, till
 " His people here so tortured them, they fled.
 " And now, is it because I grow in flesh 795
 " And spirit one with him their torturer,
 " That they, renouncing him, must cast off me ?
 " If I were graced by God to have a child,
 " Could I one day deny God graced me so ?
 " Then, since my husband hates me, I shall break 800
 " No law that reigns in this fell house of hate,
 " By using—letting have effect so much
 " Of hate as hides me from that whole of hate
 " Would take my life which I want and must have—
 " Just as I take from your excess of love 805
 " Enough to save my life with, all I need.
 " The Archbishop said to murder me were sin :

“ My leaving Guido were a kind of death
 “ With no sin,—more death, he must answer for.
 “ Hear now what death to him and life to you 810
 “ I wish to pay and owe. Take me to Rome !
 “ You go to Rome, the servant makes me hear.
 “ Take me as you would take a dog, I think,
 “ Masterless left for strangers to maltreat :
 “ Take me home like that—leave me in the house 815
 “ Where the father and the mother are ; and soon
 “ They ’ll come to know and call me by my name,
 “ Their child once more, since child I am, for all
 “ They now forget me, which is the worst o’ the
 dream—

“ And the way to end dreams is to break them,
 stand, 820
 “ Walk, go : then help me to stand, walk and go !
 “ The Governor said the strong should help the
 weak :
 “ You know how weak the strongest women are.
 “ How could I find my way there by myself?
 “ I cannot even call out, make them hear— 825
 “ Just as in dreams : I have tried and proved the
 fact.
 “ I have told this story and more to good great
 men,
 “ The Archbishop and the Governor: they smiled.
 “ ‘ Stop your mouth, fair one ! ’—presently they
 frowned,
 “ ‘ Get you gone, disengage you from our feet ! ’ 830
 “ I went in my despair to an old priest,
 “ Only a friar, no great man like these two,
 “ But good, the Augustinian, people name
 “ Romano,—he confessed me two months since :
 “ He fears God, why then needs he fear the world ? 835
 “ And when he questioned how it came about
 “ That I was found in danger of a sin—

“Despair of any help from providence,—

“‘Since, though your husband outrage you,’ said he,

“‘That is a case too common, the wives die

840

“‘Or live, but do not sin so deep as this’—

“Then I told—what I never will tell you—

“How, worse than husband’s hate, I had to bear

“The love,—soliciting to shame called love,—

“Of his brother,—the young idle priest i’ the house

845

“With only the devil to meet there. ‘This is grave—

“‘Yes, we must interfere: I counsel,—write

“‘To those who used to be your parents once,

“‘Of dangers here, bid them convey you hence!’

“‘But,’ said I, ‘when I neither read nor write?’

850

“Then he took pity and promised ‘I will write.’

“If he did so,—why, they are dumb or dead:

“Either they give no credit to the tale,

“Or else, wrapped wholly up in their own joy

“Of such escape, they care not who cries, still

855

“I’ the clutches. Anyhow, no word arrives.

“All such extravagance and dreadfulness

“Seems incident to dreaming, cured one way,—

“Wake me! The letter I received this morn,

“Said—if the woman spoke your very sense—

860

“‘You would die for me’: I can believe it now:

“For now the dream gets to involve yourself.

“First of all, you seemed wicked and not good,

“In writing me those letters: you came in

“Like a thief upon me. I this morning said

865

“In my extremity, entreat the thief!

“Try if he have in him no honest touch!

“A thief might save me from a murderer.

“‘T was a thief said the last kind word to Christ:

“Christ took the kindness and forgave the theft:

870

“And so did I prepare what I now say.

“But now, that you stand and I see your face,
 “Though you have never uttered word yet,—well,
 I know,

“Here too has been dream-work, delusion too,
 “And that at no time, you with the eyes here, 875
 “Ever intended to do wrong by me,
 “Nor wrote such letters therefore. It is false,
 “And you are true, have been true, will be true.
 “To Rome then,—when is it you take me there?
 “Each minute lost is mortal. When?—I ask.” 880

I answered “It shall be when it can be.

“I will go hence and do your pleasure, find
 “The sure and speedy means of travel, then
 “Come back and take you to your friends in
 Rome.

“There wants a carriage, money and the rest,— 885
 “A day’s work by to-morrow at this time.
 “How shall I see you and assure escape?”

She replied, “Pass, to-morrow at this hour.

“If I am at the open window, well :
 “If I am absent, drop a handkerchief
 “And walk by ! I shall see from where I watch,
 “And know that all is done. Return next eve,
 “And next, and so till we can meet and speak !”
 “To-morrow at this hour I pass,” said I.

She was withdrawn. 895

Here is another point
 I bid you pause at. When I told thus far,
 Someone said, subtly, “Here at least was found
 “Your confidence in error,—you perceived
 “The spirit of the letters, in a sort,
 “Had been the lady’s, if the body should be
 “Supplied by Guido : say, he forged them all !
 “Here was the unforged fact—she sent for you,

“Spontaneously elected you to help,
 “—What men call, loved you: Guido read her mind, 905
 “Gave it expression to assure the world
 “The case was just as he foresaw: he wrote,
 “She spoke.”

Sirs, that first simile serves still,—
 That falsehood of a scorpion hatched, I say, 910
 Nowhere i' the world but in Madonna's mouth.
 Go on! Suppose, that falsehood foiled, next eve
 Pictured Madonna raised her painted hand,
 Fixed the face Rafael bent above the Babe,
 On my face as I flung me at her feet: 915
 Such miracle vouchsafed and manifest,
 Would that prove the first lying tale was true?
 Pompilia spoke, and I at once received,
 Accepted my own fact, my miracle
 Self-authorized and self-explained,—she chose 920
 To summon me and signify her choice.
 Afterward,—oh! I gave a passing glance
 To a certain ugly cloud-shape, goblin-shred
 Of hell-smoke hurrying past the splendid moon
 Out now to tolerate no darkness more, 925
 And saw right through the thing that tried to pass
 For truth and solid, not an empty lie:
 “So, he not only forged the words for her
 “But words for me, made letters he called mine:
 “What I sent, he retained, gave these in place, 930
 “All by the mistress-messenger! As I
 “Recognized her, at potency of truth,
 “So she, by the crystalline soul, knew me,
 “Never mistook the signs. Enough of this—
 “Let the wraith go to nothingness again,
 “Here is the orb, have only thought for her!” 935

“Thought?” nay, Sirs, what shall follow was not
 thought:

I have thought sometimes, and thought long and hard.

I have stood before, gone round a serious thing,
Tasked my whole mind to touch and clasp it close, 940
As I stretch forth my arm to touch this bar.

God and man, and what duty I owe both,—

I dare to say I have confronted these

In thought : but no such faculty helped here.

I put forth no thought,—powerless, all that night 945

I paced the city : it was the first Spring.

By the invasion I lay passive to,

In rushed new things, the old were rapt away ;

Alike abolished—the imprisonment

Of the outside air, the inside weight o' the world 950

That pulled me down. Death meant, to spurn
the ground,

Soar to the sky,—die well and you do that.

The very immolation made the bliss ;

Death was the heart of life, and all the harm

My folly had crouched to avoid, now proved a
veil

955

Hiding all gain my wisdom strove to grasp :

As if the intense centre of the flame

Should turn a heaven to that devoted fly

Which hitherto, sophist alike and sage,

Saint Thomas with his sober grey goose-quill, 960

And sinner Plato by Cephisian reed,

Would fain, pretending just the insect's good,

Whisk off, drive back, consign to shade again.

Into another state, under new rule

I knew myself was passing swift and sure ;

Whereof the initiatory pang approached,

Felicitous annoy, as bitter-sweet

As when the virgin-band, the victors chaste,

Feel at the end the earthly garments drop,

And rise with something of a rosy shame

960

965

970

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK VI

Into immortal nakedness : so I
Lay, and let come the proper throe would thrill
Into the ecstasy and outthrob pain.

I' the grey of dawn it was I found myself
Facing the pillared front o' the Pieve—mine,
My church : it seemed to say for the first time
"But am not I the Bride, the mystic love
"O' the Lamb, who took thy plighted troth, my
priest,

"To fold thy warm heart on my heart of stone
"And freeze thee nor unfasten any more ?
"This is a fleshly woman,—let the free
"Bestow their life-blood, thou art pulseless now!"
See ! Day by day I had risen and left this church
At the signal waved me by some foolish fan,
With half a curse and half a pitying smile
For the monk I stumbled over in my haste,
Prostrate and corpse-like at the altar-foot
Intent on his *corona* : then the church
Was ready with her quip, if word conduced,
To quicken my pace nor stop for prating—"There!
"Be thankful you are no such ninny, go
"Rather to teach a black-eyed novice cards
"Than gabble Latin and protrude that nose
"Smoothed to a sheep's through no brains and
much faith !"

That sort of incentive ! Now the church changed
tone—

Now, when I found out first that life and death
Are means to an end, that passion uses both,
Indisputably mistress of the man
Whose form of worship is self-sacrifice :
Now, from the stone lungs sighed the scrannel
voice
"Leave that live passion, come be dead with me!"

975

980

985

990

995

1000

As if, i' the fabled garden, I had gone
 On great adventure, plucked in ignorance
 Hedge-fruit, and feasted to satiety,
 Laughing at such high fame for hips and haws, 1005
 And scorned the achievement: then come all at
 once

O' the prize o' the place, the thing of perfect gold,
 The apple's self: and, scarce my eye on that,
 Was 'ware as well o' the seven-fold dragon's watch.

Sirs, I obeyed. Obedience was too strange,— 1010
 This new thing that had been struck into me
 By the look o' the lady,—to dare disobey
 The first authoritative word. 'T was God's.
 I had been lifted to the level of her,
 Could take such sounds into my sense. I said 1015
 "We two are cognisant o' the Master now;
 "She it is bids me bow the head: how true,
 "I am a priest! I see the function here;
 "I thought the other way self-sacrifice:
 "This is the true, seals up the perfect sum. 1020
 "I pay it, sit down, silently obey."

So, I went home. Dawn broke, noon broadened,
 I—

I sat stone-still, let time run over me.
 The sun slanted into my room, had reached
 The west. I opened book,—Aquinas blazed 1025
 With one black name only on the white page.
 I looked up, saw the sunset: vespers rang:
 "She counts the minutes till I keep my word
 "And come say all is ready. I am a priest.
 "Duty to God is duty to her: I think 1030
 "God, who created her, will save her too
 "Some new way, by one miracle the more,
 "Without me. Then, prayer may avail perhaps."

I went to my own place i' the Pieve, read

The office: I was back at home again

Sitting i' the dark. "Could she but know—but
know

"That, were there good in this distinct from God's,

"Really good as it reached her, though procured

"By a sin of mine,—I should sin: God forgives.

"She knows it is no fear withdraws me: fear?

"Of what? Suspense here is the terrible thing.

"If she should, as she counts the minutes, come

"On the fantastic notion that I fear

"The world now, fear the Archbishop, fear perhaps

"Count Guido, he who, having forged the lies,

"May wait the work, attend the effect,—I fear

"The sword of Guido! Let God see to that—

"Hating lies, let not her believe a lie!"

Again the morning found me. "I will work,

"Tie down my foolish thoughts. Thank God so far!

"I have saved her from a scandal, stopped the tongues

"Had broken else into a cackle and hiss

"Around the noble name. Duty is still

"Wisdom: I have been wise." So the day wore.

At evening—"But, achieving victory,

"I must not blink the priest's peculiar part,

"Nor shrink to counsel, comfort: priest and friend—

"How do we discontinue to be friends?

"I will go minister, advise her seek

"Help at the source,—above all, not despair:

"There may be other happier help at hand.

"I hope it,—wherefore then neglect to say?"

1035

1040

1045

1050

1055

1060

There she stood—leaned there, for the second time,
Over the terrace, looked at me, then spoke :

“ Why is it you have suffered me to stay ” 1065

“ Breaking my heart two days more than was need ? ”

“ Why delay help, your own heart yearns to give ? ”

“ You are again here, in the self-same mind, ”

“ I see here, steadfast in the face of you,— ”

“ You grudge to do no one thing that I ask. ” 1070

“ Why then is nothing done ? You know my need. ”

“ Still, through God’s pity on me, there is time ”

“ And one day more : shall I be saved or no ? ”

I answered—“ Lady, waste no thought, no word ”

“ Even to forgive me ! Care for what I care— ” 1075

“ Only ! Now follow me as I were fate ! ”

“ Leave this house in the dark to-morrow night, ”

“ Just before daybreak :—there’s new moon this
eve— ”

“ It sets, and then begins the solid black. ”

“ Descend, proceed to the Torrione, step ” 1080

“ Over the low dilapidated wall, ”

“ Take San Clemente, there’s no other gate ”

“ Unguarded at the hour : some paces thence ”

“ An inn stands ; cross to it ; I shall be there. ”

She answered, “ If I can but find the way. ” 1085

“ But I shall find it. Go now ! ”

I did go,
Took rapidly the route myself prescribed,
Stopped at Torrione, climbed the ruined place,
Proved that the gate was practicable, reached
The inn, no eye, despite the dark, could miss,
Knocked there and entered, made the host secure : 1090

“ With Caponsacchi it is ask and have ; ”

“ I know my betters. Are you bound for Rome ? ”

“ I get swift horse and trusty man, ” said he. 1095

Then I retraced my steps, was found once more
 In my own house for the last time : there lay
 The broad pale opened Summa. "Shut his book,
 "There 's other showing ! 'T was a Thomas too
 "Obtained,—more favoured than his namesake
 here,—

1100

"A gift, tied faith fast, foiled the tug of doubt,—
 "Our Lady's girdle ; down he saw it drop
 "As she ascended into heaven, they say :
 "He kept that safe and bade all doubt adieu.
 "I too have seen a lady and hold a grace."

1105

I know not how the night passed : morning broke ;
 Presently came my servant. "Sir, this eve—
 "Do you forget ?" I started. "How forget ?
 "What is it you know ?" "With due sub-
 mission, Sir,

"This being last Monday in the month but one
 "And a vigil, since to-morrow is Saint George,
 "And feast day, and moreover day for copes,
 "And Canon Conti now away a month,
 "And Canon Crispi sour because, forsooth,
 "You let him sulk in stall and bear the brunt
 "Of the octave . . . Well, Sir, 't is important !"

1110

"True !

"Hearken, I have to start for Rome this night.
 "No word, lest Crispi overboil and burst !
 "Provide me with a laic dress ! Throw dust
 "I' the Canon's eye, stop his tongue's scandal so !
 "See there 's a sword in case of accident."
 I knew the knave, the knave knew me.

1120

And thus
 Through each familiar hindrance of the day
 Did I make steadily for its hour and end,—
 Felt time's old barrier-growth of right and fit

1125

Give way through all its twines, and let me go.
 Use and wont recognized the excepted man,
 Let speed the special service,—and I sped
 Till, at the dead between midnight and morn,
 There was I at the goal, before the gate,
 With a tune in the ears, low leading up to loud,
 A light in the eyes, faint that would soon be flare,
 Ever some spiritual witness new and new

1130

In faster frequence, crowding solitude

1135

To watch the way o' the warfare,—till, at last,

When the ecstatic minute must bring birth,

Began a whiteness in the distance, waxed

Whiter and whiter, near grew and more near,

1140

Till it was she : there did Pompilia come :

The white I saw shine through her was her soul's,

Certainly, for the body was one black,

Black from head down to foot. She did not speak,

Glided into the carriage,—so a cloud

1145

Gathers the moon up. "By San Spirito,

"To Rome, as if the road burned underneath !

"Reach Rome, then hold my head in pledge, I pay

"The run and the risk to heart's content !" Just
 that

I said,—then, in another tick of time,

1150

Sprang, was beside her, she and I alone.

So it began, our flight thro' dusk to clear,
 Through day and night and day again to night
 Once more, and to last dreadful dawn of all.

Sirs, how should I lie quiet in my grave

1155

Unless you suffer me wring, drop by drop,

My brain dry, make a riddance of the drench

Of minutes with a memory in each,

Recorded motion, breath or look of hers,

Which poured forth would present you one pure
 glass,

1160

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK VI

Mirror you plain,—as God's sea, glassed in gold,
 His saints,—the perfect soul Pompilia? Men,
 You must know that a man gets drunk with truth
 Stagnant inside him! Oh, they 've killed her,
 Sirs!

Can I be calm?

1165

Calmly! Each incident

Proves, I maintain, that action of the flight
 For the true thing it was. The first faint scratch
 O' the stone will test its nature, teach its worth
 To idiots who name Parian—coprolite.

1170

After all, I shall give no glare—at best
 Only display you certain scattered lights
 Lamping the rush and roll of the abyss :
 Nothing but here and there a fire-point pricks
 Wavelet from wavelet: well!

1175

For the first hour

We both were silent in the night, I know :
 Sometimes I did not see nor understand.
 Blackness engulphed me,—partial stupor, say—
 Then I would break way, breathe through the
 surprise,

1180

And be aware again, and see who sat
 In the dark vest with the white face and hands.
 I said to myself—“ I have caught it, I conceive
 “ The mind o' the mystery : 't is the way they
 wake

“ And wait, two martyrs somewhere in a tomb
 “ Each by each as their blessing was to die ;
 “ Some signal they are promised and expect,—
 “ When to arise before the trumpet scares :
 “ So, through the whole course of the world they
 wait

1185

“ The last day, but so fearless and so safe !
 “ No otherwise, in safety and not fear,
 “ I lie, because she lies too by my side.”

1190

You know this is not love, Sirs,—it is faith,
 The feeling that there 's God, he reigns and rules
 Out of this low world : that is all ; no harm ! 1195
 At times she drew a soft sigh—music seemed
 Always to hover just above her lips,
 Not settle,—break a silence music too.

In the determined morning, I first found
 Her head erect, her face turned full to me,
 Her soul intent on mine through two wide eyes. 1200
 I answered them. “ You are saved hitherto.
 “ We have passed Perugia,—gone round by the
 wood,

“ Not through, I seem to think,—and opposite
 “ I know Assisi ; this is holy ground.” 1205

Then she resumed. “ How long since we both
 left

“ Arezzo ? ” “ Years—and certain hours beside.”

It was at . . . ah, but I forget the names !
 ‘T is a mere post-house and a hovel or two ;
 I left the carriage and got bread and wine 1210
 And brought it her. “ Does it detain to eat ? ”
 “ They stay perforce, change horses,—therefore
 eat !

“ We lose no minute : we arrive, be sure ! ”
 This was—I know not where—there 's a great hill
 Close over, and the stream has lost its bridge, 1215
 One fords it. She began—“ I have heard say
 “ Of some sick body that my mother knew,
 “ ‘T was no good sign when in a limb diseased
 “ All the pain suddenly departs,—as if
 “ The guardian angel discontinued pain 1220
 “ Because the hope of cure was gone at last :
 “ The limb will not again exert itself,
 “ It needs be pained no longer : so with me,

“—My soul whence all the pain is past at once :
 “All pain must be to work some good in the end. 1225
 “True, this I feel now, this may be that good,
 “Pain was because of,—otherwise, I fear !”

She said,—a long while later in the day,
 When I had let the silence be,—abrupt—
 “Have you a mother ?” “She died, I was born.” 1230
 “A sister then ?” “No sister.” “Who was it—
 “What woman were you used to serve this way,
 “Be kind to, till I called you and you came ?”
 I did not like that word. Soon afterward—
 “Tell me, are men unhappy, in some kind 1235
 “Of mere unhappiness at being men,
 “As women suffer, being womanish ?
 “Have you, now, some unhappiness, I mean,
 “Born of what may be man’s strength overmuch,
 “To match the undue susceptibility, 1240
 “The sense at every pore when hate is close ?
 “It hurts us if a baby hides its face
 “Or child strikes at us punily, calls names
 “Or makes a mouth,—much more if stranger men
 “Laugh or frown,—just as that were much to bear ! 1245
 “Yet rocks split,—and the blow-ball does no more,
 “Quivers to feathery nothing at a touch ;
 “And strength may have its drawback weakness
 ‘scapes.”

Once she asked “What is it that made you smile,
 “At the great gate with the eagles and the snakes, 1250
 “Where the company entered, ‘t is a long time
 since ?”
 “—Forgive—I think you would not understand :
 “Ah, but you ask me,—therefore, it was this.
 “That was a certain bishop’s villa-gate,
 “I knew it by the eagles,—and at once 1255

“Remembered this same bishop was just he
 “People of old were wont to bid me please
 “If I would catch preferment: so, I smiled
 “Because an impulse came to me, a whim—
 “What if I prayed the prelate leave to speak, 1260
 “Began upon him in his presence-hall
 “—‘What, still at work so grey and obsolete?
 “‘Still rocheted and mitred more or less?
 “‘Don’t you feel all that out of fashion now?
 “‘I find out when the day of things is done !’” 1265

At eve we heard the *angelus*: she turned—
 “I told you I can neither read nor write.
 “My life stopped with the play-time; I will learn,
 “If I begin to live again: but you—
 “Who are a priest—wherefore do you not read 1270
 “The service at this hour? Read Gabriel’s song,
 “The lesson, and then read the little prayer
 “To Raphael, proper for us travellers !”
 I did not like that, neither, but I read.

When we stopped at Foligno it was dark. 1275
 The people of the post came out with lights:
 The driver said, “This time to-morrow, may
 “Saints only help, relays continue good,
 “Nor robbers hinder, we arrive at Rome.”
 I urged, “Why tax your strength a second night? 1280
 “Trust me, alight here and take brief repose!
 “We are out of harm’s reach, past pursuit: go sleep
 “If but an hour! I keep watch, guard the while
 “Here in the doorway.” But her whole face
 changed,
 The misery grew again about her mouth, 1285
 The eyes burned up from faintness, like the fawn’s
 Tired to death in the thicket, when she feels
 The probing spear o’ the huntsman. “Oh, no stay!”

She cried, in the fawn's cry, "On to Rome, on, on—
 "Unless 't is you who fear,—which cannot be!" 1290

We did go on all night; but at its close
 She was troubled, restless, moaned low, talked at
 whiles

To herself, her brow on quiver with the dream :
 Once, wide awake, she menaced, at arms' length
 Waved away something—"Never again with you!" 1295
 "My soul is mine, my body is my soul's :
 "You and I are divided ever more
 "In soul and body : get you gone!" Then I—
 "Why, in my whole life I have never prayed!
 "Oh, if the God, that only can, would help ! 1300
 "Am I his priest with power to cast out fiends ?
 "Let God arise and all his enemies
 "Be scattered!" By morn, there was peace, no
 sigh
 Out of the deep sleep.

When she woke at last, 1305
 I answered the first look—"Scarce twelve hours
 more,
 "Then, Rome! There probably was no pursuit,
 "There cannot now be peril: bear up brave!
 "Just some twelve hours to press through to the
 prize :
 "Then, no more of the terrible journey!" "Then, 1310
 "No more o' the journey: if it might but last!
 "Always, my life-long, thus to journey still!
 "It is the interruption that I dread,—
 "With no dread, ever to be here and thus!
 "Never to see a face nor hear a voice! 1315
 "Yours is no voice; you speak when you are
 dumb;
 "Nor face, I see it in the dark. I want

“No face nor voice that change and grow unkind.”
That I liked, that was the best thing she said.

In the broad day, I dared entreat, “Descend!” 1320
I told a woman, at the garden-gate
By the post-house, white and pleasant in the sun,
“It is my sister,—talk with her apart!
“She is married and unhappy, you perceive;
“I take her home because her heart is hurt; 1325
“Comfort her as you women understand!”
So, there I left them by the garden-wall,
Paced the road, then bade put the horses to,
Came back, and there she sat: close to her knee,
A black-eyed child still held the bowl of milk, 1330
Wondered to see how little she could drink,
And in her arms the woman’s infant lay.
She smiled at me “How much good this has done!
“This is a whole night’s rest and how much more!
“I can proceed now, though I wish to stay. 1335
“How do you call that tree with the thick top
“That holds in all its leafy green and gold
“The sun now like an immense egg of fire?”
(It was a million-leaved mimosa.) “Take
“The babe away from me and let me go!” 1340
And in the carriage “Still a day, my friend!
“And perhaps half a night, the woman fears.
“I pray it finish since it cannot last:
“There may be more misfortune at the close,
“And where will you be? God suffice me then!” 1345
And presently—for there was a roadside-shrine—
“When I was taken first to my own church
“Lorenzo in Lucina, being a girl,
“And bid confess my faults, I interposed
“‘But teach me what fault to confess and know!’ 1350
“So, the priest said—‘You should bethink your-
self:

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK VI

““Each human being needs must have done wrong!”

“Now, be you candid and no priest but friend—

“Were I surprised and killed here on the spot,

“A runaway from husband and his home, 1355

“Do you account it were in sin I died ?

“My husband used to seem to harm me, not . . .

“Not on pretence he punished sin of mine,

“Nor for sin’s sake and lust of cruelty,

“But as I heard him bid a farming-man 1360

“At the villa take a lamb once to the wood

“And there ill-treat it, meaning that the wolf

“Should hear its cries, and so come, quick be caught,

“Enticed to the trap : he practised thus with me

“That so, whatever were his gain thereby, 1365

“Others than I might become prey and spoil.

“Had it been only between our two selves,—

“His pleasure and my pain,—why, pleasure him

“By dying, nor such need to make a coil !

“But this was worth an effort, that my pain 1370

“Should not become a snare, prove pain threefold

“To other people—strangers—or unborn—

“How should I know? I sought release from that—

“I think, or else from,—dare I say, some cause

“Such as is put into a tree, which turns 1375

“Away from the north wind with what nest it holds,—

“The woman said that trees so turn: now, friend,

“Tell me, because I cannot trust myself!

“You are a man : what have I done amiss ?”

You must conceive my answer,—I forgot— 1380

Taken up wholly with the thought, perhaps,

This time she might have said,—might, did not say—

“You are a priest.” She said, “my friend.”

Day wore,

We passed the places, somehow the calm went, 1385
 Again the restless eyes began to rove
 In new fear of the foe mine could not see.
 She wandered in her mind,—addressed me once
 "Gaetano!"—that is not my name: whose name?
 I grew alarmed, my head seemed turning too. 1390
 I quickened pace with promise now, now threat:
 Bade drive and drive, nor any stopping more.
 "Too deep i' the thick of the struggle, struggle
 through!"

"Then drench her in repose though death's self
 pour
 "The plenitude of quiet,—help us, God, 1395
 "Whom the winds carry!"

Suddenly I saw

The old tower, and the little white-walled clump
 Of buildings and the cypress-tree or two,—
 "Already Castelnuovo—Rome!" I cried,
 "As good as Rome,—Rome is the next stage,
 think!" 1400

"This is where travellers' hearts are wont to beat.
 "Say you are saved, sweet lady!" Up she woke.
 The sky was fierce with colour from the sun
 Setting. She screamed out "No, I must not die!" 1405
 "Take me no farther, I should die: stay here!
 "I have more life to save than mine!"

She swooned.

We seemed safe: what was it foreboded so?
 Out of the coach into the inn I bore 1410
 The motionless and breathless pure and pale
 Pompilia,—bore her through a pitying group
 And laid her on a couch, still calm and cured
 By deep sleep of all woes at once. The host
 Was urgent "Let her stay an hour or two!
 "Leave her to us, all will be right by morn!" 1415
 Oh, my foreboding! But I could not choose.

THE RING AND THE BOOK BOOK VI

I paced the passage, kept watch all night long.
I listened,—not one movement, not one sigh.

“Fear not: she sleeps so sound!” they said: but I
Feared, all the same, kept fearing more and more,
Found myself throb with fear from head to foot,
Filled with a sense of such impending woe,
That, at first pause of night, pretence of gray,
I made my mind up it was morn.—“Reach Rome,
“Lest hell reach her! A dozen miles to make,
“Another long breath, and we emerge!” I stood
I’ the court-yard, roused the sleepy grooms.

“Have out

“Carriage and horse, give haste, take gold!” said I.
While they made ready in the doubtful morn,—
‘T was the last minute,—needs must I ascend
And break her sleep; I turned to go.

And there
Faced me Count Guido, there posed the mean man
As master,—took the field, encamped his rights,
Challenged the world: there leered new triumph,
there

Scowled the old malice in the visage bad
And black o’ the scamp. Soon triumph suppled
the tongue

A little, malice glued to his dry throat,
And he part howled, part hissed . . . oh, how he
kept

Well out o’ the way, at arm’s length and to spare!—
“My salutation to your priesthood! What?
“Matutinal, busy with book so soon
“Of an April day that’s damp as tears that now
“Deluge Arezzo at its darling’s flight?—
“‘T is unfair, wrongs feminity at large,
“To let a single dame monopolize
“A heart the whole sex claims, should share alike:
“Therefore I overtake you, Canon! Come!

“The lady,—could you leave her side so soon ? 1450
 “You have not yet experienced at her hands
 “My treatment, you lay down undrugged, I see !
 “Hence this alertness—hence no death-in-life
 “Likewhat heldarms fast when she stole from mine.
 “To be sure, you took the solace and repose 1455
 “That first night at Foligno !—news abound
 “O’ the road by this time,—men regaled me much,
 “As past them I came halting after you,
 “Vulcan pursuing Mars, as poets sing,—
 “Still at the last here pant I, but arrive, 1460
 “Vulcan—and not without my Cyclops too,
 “The Commissary and the unpoisoned arm
 “O’ the Civil Force, should Mars turn mutineer.
 “Enough of fooling : capture the culprits, friend !
 “Here is the lover in the smart disguise 1465
 “With the sword,—he is a priest, so mine lies still.
 “There upstairs hides my wife the runaway,
 “His leman : the two plotted, poisoned first,
 “Plundered me after, and eloped thus far
 “Where now you find them. Do your duty quick ! 1470
 “Arrest and hold him ! That’s done : now catch
 her !”

During this speech of that man,—well, I stood
 Away, as he managed,—still, I stood as near
 The throat of him,—with these two hands, my
 own,—

As now I stand near yours, Sir,—one quick spring, 1475
 One great good satisfying gripe, and lo !
 There had he lain abolished with his lie,
 Creation purged o’ the miscreate, man redeemed,
 A spittle wiped off from the face of God !
 I, in some measure, seek a poor excuse 1480
 For what I left undone, in just this fact
 That my first feeling at the speech I quote
 Was—not of what a blasphemy was dared,

Not what a bag of venomous purulence
 Was split and noisome,—but how splendidly 1485
 Mirthful, how ludicrous a lie was launched !
 Would Molière's self wish more than hear such man
 Call, claim such woman for his own, his wife,
 Even though, in due amazement at the boast,
 He had stammered, she moreover was divine ? 1490
 She to be his,—were hardly less absurd
 Than that he took her name into his mouth,
 Licked, and then let it go again, the beast,
 Signed with his slaver. Oh, she poisoned him,
 Plundered him, and the rest ! Well, what I wished 1495
 Was, that he would but go on, say once more
 So to the world, and get his meed of men,
 The fist's reply to the filth. And while I mused,
 The minute, oh the misery, was gone !
 On either idle hand of me there stood 1500
 Really an officer, nor laughed i' the least :
 Nay, rendered justice to his reason, laid
 Logic to heart, as 't were submitted them
 "Twice two makes four."

"And now, catch her !" he cried. 1505
 That sobered me. "Let myself lead the way—
 "Ere you arrest me, who am somebody,
 "Being, as you hear, a priest and privileged,—
 "To the lady's chamber ! I presume you—men
 "Expert, instructed how to find out truth, 1510
 "Familiar with the guise of guilt. Detect
 "Guilt on her face when it meets mine, then judge
 "Between us and the mad dog howling there !"
 Up we all went together, in they broke
 O' the chamber late my chapel. There she lay, 1515
 Composed as when I laid her, that last eve,
 O' the couch, still breathless, motionless, sleep's
 self,
 Wax-white, seraphic, saturate with the sun

O' the morning that now flooded from the front
 And filled the window with a light like blood. 1520
 "Behold the poisoner, the adulteress,
 "—And feigning sleep too! Seize, bind!" Guido
 hissed.

She started up, stood erect, face to face
 With the husband: back he fell, was buttressed
 there

By the window all a flame with morning-red, 1525
 He the black figure, the opprobrious blur
 Against all peace and joy and light and life.
 "Away from between me and hell!" she cried:
 "Hell for me, no embracing any more!
 "I am God's, I love God, God—whose knees I
 clasp,

"Whose utterly most just award I take,
 "But bear no more love-making devils: hence!"
 I may have made an effort to reach her side
 From where I stood i' the door-way,—anyhow
 I found the arms, I wanted, pinioned fast, 1535
 Was powerless in the clutch to left and right
 O' the rabble pouring in, rascality
 Enlisted, rampant on the side of hearth
 Home and the husband,—pay in prospect too!
 They heaped themselves upon me. "Ha!—and
 him

"Also you outrage? Him, too, my sole friend,
 "Guardian and saviour? That I baulk you of,
 "Since—see how God can help at last and worst!"
 Shesprang at the sword that hung beside him, seized,
 Drew, brandished it, the sunrise burned for joy 1545
 O' the blade, "Die," cried she, "devil, in God's
 name!"

Ah, but they all closed round her, twelve to one
 —The unmanly men, no woman-mother made,

Spawned somehow ! Dead-white and disarmed
she lay.

No matter for the sword, her word sufficed
To spike the coward through and through : he
shook,

Could only spit between the teeth—" You see ?
" You hear ? Bear witness, then ! Write down
. . . but no—

" Carry these criminals to the prison-house,
" For first thing ! I begin my search meanwhile
" After the stolen effects, gold, jewels, plate,
" Money and clothes, they robbed me of and fled,
" With no few amorous pieces, verse and prose,
" I have much reason to expect to find."

When I saw that—no more than the first mad speech, 1560
Made out the speaker mad and a laughing-stock,

So neither did this next device explode

One listener's indignation,—that a scribe
Did sit down, set himself to write indeed,

While sundry knaves began to peer and pry 1565

In corner and hole,—that Guido, wiping brow
And getting him a countenance, was fast

Losing his fear, beginning to strut free

O' the stage of his exploit, snuff here, sniff there,—

Then I took truth in, guessed sufficiently

The service for the moment. " What I say,

" Slight at your peril ! We are aliens here,

" My adversary and I, called noble both ;

" I am the nobler, and a name men know.

" I could refer our cause to our own Court

" In our own country, but prefer appeal

" To the nearer jurisdiction. Being a priest,

" Though in a secular garb,—for reasons good

" I shall adduce in due time to my peers,—

" I demand that the Church I serve, decide

1570

1575

1580

"Between us, right the slandered lady there.
 "A Tuscan noble, I might claim the Duke :
 "A priest, I rather choose the Church,—bid Rome
 "Cover the wronged with her inviolate shield."

There was no refusing this : they bore me off,
 They bore her off, to separate cells o' the same
 Ignoble prison, and, separate, thence to Rome.
 Pompilia's face, then and thus, looked on me
 The last time in this life : not one sight since,
 Never another sight to be ! And yet

1585

I thought I had saved her. I appealed to Rome :
 It seems I simply sent her to her death.

1590

You tell me she is dying now, or dead ;
 I cannot bring myself to quite believe

1595

This is a place you torture people in :

What if this your intelligence were just
 A subtlety, an honest wile to work

On a man at unawares ? 'T were worthy you.
 No, Sirs, I cannot have the lady dead !

That erect form, flashing brow, fulgurant eye,
 That voice immortal (oh, that voice of hers !)

1600

That vision in the blood-red day-break—that
 Leap to life of the pale electric sword

Angels go armed with,—that was not the last
 O' the lady ! Come, I see through it, you find—

1605

Know the manœuvre ! Also herself said

I had saved her : do you dare say she spoke false ?
 Let me see for myself if it be so !

Though she were dying, a Priest might be of use,
 The more when he's a friend too,—she called me

1610

Far beyond "friend." Come, let me see her—
 indeed

It is my duty, being a priest : I hope
 I stand confessed, established, proved a priest ?
 My punishment had motive that, a priest

I, in a laic garb, a mundane mode,
Did what were harmlessly done otherwise. 1615
 I never touched her with my finger-tip
 Except to carry her to the couch, that eve,
 Against my heart, beneath my head, bowed low,
 As we priests carry the paten : that is why 1620
 —To get leave and go see her of your grace—
 I have told you this whole story over again.
 Do I deserve grace ? For I might lock lips,
 Laugh at your jurisdiction : what have you
 To do with me in the matter ? I suppose 1625
 You hardly think I donned a bravo's dress
 To have a hand in the new crime ; on the old,
 Judgment 's delivered, penalty imposed,
 I was chained fast at Civita hand and foot—
 She had only you to trust to, you and Rome, 1630
 Rome and the Church, and no pert meddling priest
 Two days ago, when Guido, with the right,
 Hacked her to pieces. One might well be wroth ;
 I have been patient, done my best to help :
 I come from Civita and punishment 1635
 As friend of the Court—and for pure friendship's
 sake
 Have told my tale to the end,—nay, not the end—
 For, wait—I 'll end—not leave you that excuse !

When we were parted,—shall I go on there ?
 I was presently brought to Rome—yes, here I stood 1640
 Opposite yonder very crucifix—
 And there sat you and you, Sirs, quite the same.
 I heard charge, and bore question, and told tale
 Noted down in the book there,—turn and see
 If, by one jot or tittle, I vary now ! 1645
 I' the colour the tale takes, there 's change perhaps ;
 'T is natural, since the sky is different,
 Eclipse in the air now ; still, the outline stays.

I showed you how it came to be my part
 To save the lady. Then your clerk produced 1650
 Papers, a pack of stupid and impure
 Banalities called letters about love—
 Love, indeed,—I could teach who styled them so,
 Better, I think, though priest and loveless both !
 “—How was it that a wife, young, innocent, 1655
 “And stranger to your person, wrote this page?”—
 “—She wrote it when the Holy Father wrote
 “The bestiality that posts thro’ Rome,
 “Put in his mouth by Pasquin.” “Nor perhaps
 “Did you return these answers, verse and prose, 1660
 “Signed, sealed and sent the lady? There’s your
 hand !”
 “—This precious piece of verse, I really judge,
 “Is meant to copy my own character,
 “A clumsy mimic; and this other prose,
 “Not so much even; both rank forgery : 1665
 “Verse, quotha? Bembo’s verse! When Saint
 John wrote
 “The tract ‘*De Tribus*,’ I wrote this to match.”
 “—How came it, then, the documents were found
 “At the inn on your departure?”—“I opine,
 “Because there were no documents to find 1670
 “In my presence,—you must hide before you find.
 “Who forged them hardly practised in my view;
 “Who found them waited till I turned my back.”
 “—And what of the clandestine visits paid,
 “Nocturnal passage in and out the house 1675
 “With its lord absent? ‘T is alleged you
 climbed . . .”
 “—Flew on a broomstick to the man i’ the moon !
 “Who witnessed or will testify this trash?”
 “—The trusty servant, Margherita’s self,
 “Even she who brought you letters, you confess, 1680
 “And, you confess, took letters in reply :

“Forget not we have knowledge of the facts !”

“—Sirs, who have knowledge of the facts, defray

“The expenditure of wit I waste in vain,

“Trying to find out just one fact of all !”

1685

“She who brought letters from who could not write,

“And took back letters to who could not read,—

“Who was that messenger, of your charity ?”

“—Well, so far favours you the circumstance

“That this same messenger . . . how shall we
say ? . . .”

1690

“*Sub imputatione meretricis*

“*Laborat*,—which makes accusation null :

“We waive this woman’s : nought makes void
the next.

“Borsi, called Venerino, he who drove,

“O’ the first night when you fled away, at length

1695

“Deposes to your kissings in the coach,

“—Frequent, frenetic . . .” “When deposed
he so ?”

“After some weeks of sharp imprisonment . . .”

“—Granted by friend the Governor, I engage—”

“—For his participation in your flight !”

1700

“At length his obduracy melting made

“The avowal mentioned . . .” “Was dismissed
forthwith

“To liberty, poor knave, for recompense.

“Sirs, give what credit to the lie you can !

“For me, no word in my defence I speak,

1705

“And God shall argue for the lady !”

So

Did I stand question, and make answer, still

With the same result of smiling disbelief,

Polite impossibility of faith

1710

In such affected virtue in a priest ;

But a showing fair play, an indulgence, even,

To one no worse than others after all—

Who had not brought disgrace to the order, played
 Discreetly, ruffled gown nor ripped the cloth 1715
 In a bungling game at romps : I have told you,
 Sirs—

If I pretended simply to be pure
 Honest and Christian in the case,—absurd !
 As well go boast myself above the needs
 O' the human nature, careless how meat smells, 1720
 Wine tastes,—a saint above the smack ! But once
 Abate my crest, own flaws i' the flesh, agree
 To go with the herd, be hog no more nor less,
 Why, hogs in common herd have common rights :
 I must not be unduly borne upon, 1725
 Who just romanced a little, sowed wild oats,
 But 'scaped without a scandal, flagrant fault.
 My name helped to a mirthful circumstance :
 "Joseph" would do well to amend his plea :
 Undoubtedly—some toying with the wife, 1730
 But as for ruffian violence and rape,
 Potiphar pressed too much on the other side !
 The intrigue, the elopement, the disguise,—well
 charged !
 The letters and verse looked hardly like the truth.
 Your apprehension was—of guilt enough 1735
 To be compatible with innocence,
 So, punished best a little and not too much.
 Had I struck Guido Franceschini's face,
 You had counselled me withdraw for my own sake,
 Baulk him of bravo-hiring. Friends came round, 1740
 Congratulated, "Nobody mistakes !
 "The pettiness o' the forfeiture defines
 "The reccadillo : Guido gets his share :
 "His wife is free of husband and hook-nose,
 "The mouldy viands and the mother-in-law. 1745
 "To Civita with you and amuse the time,
 "Travesty us '*De Raptu Helenæ* !'

“A funny figure must the husband cut
 “When the wife makes him skip,—too ticklish, eh?
 “Do it in Latin, not the Vulgar, then ! 1750
 “Scazons—we ’ll copy and send his Eminence.
 “Mind—one iambus in the final foot !
 “He ’ll rectify it, be your friend for life ! ”
 Oh, Sirs, depend on me for much new light
 Thrown on the justice and religion here 1755
 By this proceeding, much fresh food for thought !

And I was just set down to study these
 In relegation, two short days ago,
 Admiring how you read the rules, when, clap,
 A thunder comes into my solitude— 1760
 I am caught up in a whirlwind and cast here,
 Told of a sudden, in this room where so late
 You dealt out law adroitly, that those scales,
 I meekly bowed to, took my allotment from,
 Guido has snatched at, broken in your hands, 1765
 Metes to himself the murder of his wife,
 Full measure, pressed down, running over now !
 Can I assist to an explanation ?—Yes,
 I rise in your esteem, sagacious Sirs,
 Stand up a renderer of reasons, not 1770
 The officious priest would personate Saint George
 For a mock Princess in undragoned days.
 What, the blood startles you ? What, after all
 The priest who needs must carry sword on thigh
 May find imperative use for it ? Then, there was 1775
 A Princess, was a dragon belching flame,
 And should have been a Saint George also ? Then,
 There might be worse schemes than to break the
 bonds
 At Arezzo, lead her by the little hand,
 Till she reached Rome, and let her try to live ? 1780
 But you were law and gospel,—would one please

Stand back, allow your faculty elbow-room ?
 You blind guides who must needs lead eyes that see !
 Fools, alike ignorant of man and God !
 What was there here should have perplexed your wit 1785
 For a wink of the owl-eyes of you ? How miss, then,
 What 's now forced on you by this flare of fact—
 As if Saint Peter failed to recognize
 Nero as no apostle, John or James,
 Till someone burned a martyr, made a torch 1790
 O' the blood and fat to show his features by !
 Could you fail read this cartulary aright
 On head and front of Franceschini there,
 Large-lettered like hell's masterpiece of print,—
 That he, from the beginning pricked at heart 1795
 By some lust, letch of hate against his wife,
 Plotted to plague her into overt sin
 And shame, would slay Pompilia body and soul,
 And save his mean self—miserably caught
 I' the quagmire of his own tricks, cheats and lies ? 1800
 —That himself wrote those papers,—from himself
 To himself,—which, i' the name of me and her,
 His mistress-messenger gave her and me,
 Touching us with such pustules of the soul
 That she and I might take the taint, be shown 1805
 To the world and shuddered over, speckled so ?
 —That the agent put her sense into my words,
 Made substitution of the thing she hoped,
 For the thing she had and held, its opposite,
 While the husband in the background bit his lips 1810
 At each fresh failure of his precious plot ?
 —That when at the last we did rush each on each,
 By no chance but because God willed it so—
 The spark of truth was struck from out our souls—
 Made all of me, descried in the first glance, 1815
 Seem fair and honest and permissible love
 O' the good and true—as the first glance told me

There was no duty patent in the world
 Like daring try be good and true myself,
 Leaving the shows of things to the Lord of Show 1820
 And Prince o' the Power of the Air. Our very
 flight,

Even to its most ambiguous circumstance,
 Irrefragably proved how futile, false . . .
 Why, men—men and not boys—boys and not
 babes—

Babes and not beasts—beasts and not stocks and
 stones!—

Had the liar's lie been true one pin-point speck, 1825
 Were I the accepted suitor, free o' the place,
 Disposer of the time, to come at a call
 And go at a wink as who should say me nay,—
 What need of flight, what were the gain therefrom 1830
 But just damnation, failure or success?

Damnation pure and simple to her the wife
 And me the priest—who bartered private bliss
 For public reprobation, the safe shade
 For the sunshine which men see to pelt me by : 1835

What other advantage,—we who led the days
 And nights alone i' the house,—was flight to find ?
 In our whole journey did we stop an hour,
 Diverge a foot from straight road till we reached
 Or would have reached—but for that fate of ours— 1840
 The father and mother, in the eye of Rome,
 The eye of yourselves we made aware of us
 At the first fall of misfortune ? And indeed
 You did so far give sanction to our flight,
 Confirm its purpose, as lend helping hand,
 Deliver up Pompilia not to him 1845

She fled, but those the flight was ventured for.
 Why then could you, who stopped short, not go on
 One poor step more, and justify the means,
 Having allowed the end?—not see and say 1850

“Here’s the exceptional conduct that should claim
 “To be exceptionally judged on rules
 “Which, understood, make no exception here”—
 Why play instead into the devil’s hands
 By dealing so ambiguously as gave
 Guido the power to intervene like me,
 Prove one exception more? I saved his wife
 Against law: against law he slays her now:
 Deal with him!

1855

I have done with being judged.
 I stand here guiltless in thought, word and deed,
 To the point that I apprise you,—in contempt
 For all misapprehending ignorance
 O’ the human heart, much more the mind of
 Christ,—

1860

That I assuredly did bow, was blessed
 By the revelation of Pompilia. There!
 Such is the final fact I fling you, Sirs,
 To mouth and mumble and misinterpret: there!
 “The priest’s in love,” have it the vulgar way!
 Unpriest me, rend the rags o’ the vestment, do—
 Degrade deep, disenfranchise all you dare—
 Remove me from the midst, no longer priest
 And fit companion for the like of you—
 Your gay Abati with the well-turned leg
 And rose i’ the hat-rim, Canons, cross at neck
 And silk mask in the pocket of the gown,
 Brisk Bishops with the world’s musk still unbrushed
 From the rochet; I’ll no more of these good
 things:
 There’s a crack somewhere, something that’s un-
 sound
 I’ the rattle!

1870

1875

1880

For Pompilia—be advised,
 Build churches, go pray! You will find me there,

I know, if you come,—and you will come, I know.
 Why, there 's a Judge weeping ! Did not I say
 You were good and true at bottom ? You see the
 truth—

1885

I am glad I helped you : she helped me just so.

But for Count Guido,—you must counsel there !
 I bow my head, bend to the very dust,
 Break myself up in shame of faultiness.

I had him one whole moment, as I said—

1890

As I remember, as will never out

O' the thoughts of me,—I had him in arm's reach
 There,—as you stand, Sir, now you cease to sit,—
 I could have killed him ere he killed his wife,
 And did not : he went off alive and well

1895

And then effected this last feat—through me !

Me—not through you—dismiss that fear ! 'T was
 you

Hindered me staying here to save her,—not
 From leaving you and going back to him
 And doing service in Arezzo. Come,

1900

Instruct me in procedure ! I conceive—

In all due self-abasement might I speak—

How you will deal with Guido : oh, not death !

Death, if it let her life be : otherwise

Not death,—your lights will teach you clearer ! I

Certainly have an instinct of my own

I' the matter : bear with me and weigh its worth !

Let us go away—leave Guido all alone

Back on the world again that knows him now !

I think he will be found (indulge so far !)

1910

Not to die so much as slide out of life,

Pushed by the general horror and common hate

Low, lower,—left o' the very ledge of things,

I seem to see him catch convulsively

One by one at all honest forms of life

1915

At reason, order, decency and use—
 To cramp him and get foothold by at least ;
 And still they disengage them from his clutch.
 “What, you are he, then, had Pompilia once
 “And so forwent her ? Take not up with us ! ” 1920
 And thus I see him slowly and surely edged
 Off all the table-land whence life upsprings
 Aspiring to be immortality,
 As the snake, hatched on hill-top by mischance,
 Despite his wriggling, slips, slides, slidders down 1925
 Hill-side, lies low and prostrate on the smooth
 Level of the outer place, lapsed in the vale :
 So I lose Guido in the loneliness,
 Silence and dusk, till at the doleful end,
 At the horizontal line, creation’s verge, 1930
 From what just is to absolute nothingness—
 Whom is it, straining onward still, he meets ?
 What other man deep further in the fate,
 Who, turning at the prize of a footfall
 To flatter him and promise fellowship,
 Discovers in the act a frightful face— 1935
 Judas, made monstrous by much solitude !
 The two are at one now ! Let them love their love
 That bites and claws like hate, or hate their hate
 That mops and mows and makes as it were love ! 1940
 There, let them each tear each in devil’s-fun,
 Or fondle this the other while malice aches—
 Both teach, both learn detestability !
 Kiss him the kiss, Iscariot ! Pay that back,
 That smatch o’ the slaver blistering on your lip, 1945
 By the better trick, the insult he spared Christ—
 Lure him the lure o’ the letters, Aretine !
 Lick him o’er slimy-smooth with jelly-filth
 O’ the verse-and-prose pollution in love’s guise !
 The cockatrice is with the basilisk ! 1950
 There let them grapple, denizens o’ the dark,

Foes or friends, but indissolubly bound,
In their one spot out of the ken of God
Or care of man, for ever and ever more !

Why, Sirs, what 's this ? Why, this is sorry and
strange !

1955

Futility, divagation : this from me
Bound to be rational, justify an act
Of sober man !—whereas, being moved so much,
I give you cause to doubt the lady's mind :

A pretty sarcasm for the world ! I fear

1960

You do her wit injustice,—all through me !

Like my fate all through,—ineffective help !

A poor rash advocate I prove myself.

You might be angry with good cause : but sure
At the advocate,—only at the undue zeal

1965

That spoils the force of his own plea, I think ?

My part was just to tell you how things stand,
State facts and not be flustered at their fume.

But then 't is a priest speaks : as for love,—no !

If you let buzz a vulgar fly like that

1970

About your brains, as if I loved, forsooth,

Indeed, Sirs, you do wrong ! We had no thought
Of such infatuation, she and I :

There are many points that prove it : do be just !

I told you,—at one little roadside-place

1975

I spent a good half-hour, paced to and fro

The garden ; just to leave her free awhile,

I plucked a handful of Spring herb and bloom :

I might have sat beside her on the bench

Where the children were : I wish the thing had
been,

1980

Indeed : the event could not be worse, you know :

One more half-hour of her saved ! She 's dead
now, Sirs !

While I was running on at such a rate,

Friends should have plucked me by the sleeve :
I went

Too much o' the trivial outside of her face 1985

And the purity that shone there—plain to me,

Not to you, what more natural ? Nor am I

Infatuated,—oh, I saw, be sure !

Her brow had not the right line, leaned too much,

Painters would say ; they like the straight-up Greek : 1990

This seemed bent somewhat with an invisible
crown

Of martyr and saint, not such as art approves.

And how the dark orbs dwelt deep underneath,

Looked out of such a sad sweet heaven on me !

The lips, compressed a little, came forward too,

1995

Careful for a whole world of sin and pain.

That was the face, her husband makes his plea,

He sought just to disfigure,—no offence

Beyond that ! Sirs, let us be rational !

He needs must vindicate his honour,—ay,

2000

Yet shirks, the coward, in a clown's disguise,

Away from the scene, endeavours to escape.

Now, had he done so, slain and left no trace

O' the slayer,—what were vindicated, pray ?

You had found his wife disfigured or a corpse,

2005

For what and by whom ? It is too palpable !

Then, here 's another point involving law :

I use this argument to show you meant

No calumny against us by that title

O' the sentence,—liars try to twist it so :

2010

What penalty it bore, I had to pay

Till further proof should follow of innocence—

Probatio nis ob defectum,—proof ?

How could you get proof without trying us ?

You went through the preliminary form,

2015

Stopped there, contrived this sentence to amuse

The adversary. If the title ran

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For more than fault imputed and not proved,
That was a simple penman's error, else
A slip i' the phrase,—as when we say of you 2020
"Charged with injustice"—which may either be
Or not be,—'t is a name that sticks meanwhile.
Another relevant matter: fool that I am!
Not what I wish true, yet a point friends urge:
It is not true,—yet, since friends think it helps,— 2025
She only tried me when some others failed—
Began with Conti, whom I told you of,
And Guillichini, Guido's kinsfolk both,
And when abandoned by them, not before,
Turned to me. That's conclusive why she turned. 2030
Much good they got by the happy cowardice!
Conti is dead, poisoned a month ago:
Does that much strike you as a sin? Not much,
After the present murder,—one mark more
On the Moor's skin,—what is black by blacker still? 2035
Conti had come here and told truth. And so
With Guillichini; he's condemned of course
To the galleys, as a friend in this affair,
Tried and condemned for no one thing i' the world,
A fortnight since by who but the Governor?— 2040
The just judge, who refused Pompilia help
At first blush, being her husband's friend, you know.
There are two tales to suit the separate courts,
Arezzo and Rome: he tells you here, we fled
Alone, unhelped,—lays stress on the main fault, 2045
The spiritual sin, Rome looks to: but elsewhere
He likes best we should break in, steal, bear off,
Be fit to brand and pillory and flog—
That's the charge goes to the heart of the
Governor:
If these unpriest me, you and I may yet 2050
Converse, Vincenzo Marzi-Medici!
Oh, Sirs, there are worse men than you, I say!

More easily duped, I mean ; this stupid lie,
 Its liar never dared propound in Rome,
 He gets Arezzo to receive,—nay more,
 Gets Florence and the Duke to authorize !
 This is their Rota's sentence, their Granduke
 Signs and seals ! Rome for me henceforward—
 Rome,

2055

Where better men are,—most of all, that man
 The Augustinian of the Hospital,

2060

Who writes the letter,—he confessed, he says,
 Many a dying person, never one
 So sweet and true and pure and beautiful.

A good man ! Will you make him Pope one day ?

Not that he is not good too, this we have—

2065

But old,—else he would have his word to speak,
 His truth to teach the world : I thirst for truth,
 But shall not drink it till I reach the source.

Sirs, I am quiet again. You see, we are
 So very pitiable, she and I,

2070

Who had conceivably been otherwise.

Forget distemperature and idle heat !

Apart from truth's sake, what's to move so much ?

Pompilia will be presently with God ;

2075

I am, on earth, as good as out of it,

A relegated priest ; when exile ends,

I mean to do my duty and live long.

She and I are mere strangers now : but priests

Should study passion ; how else cure mankind,

Who come for help in passionate extremes ?

2080

I do but play with an imagined life

Of who, unfettered by a vow, unblessed

By the higher call,—since you will have it so,—

Leads it companioned by the woman there.

To live, and see her learn, and learn by her,

2085

Out of the low obscure and petty world—

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Or only see one purpose and one will
 Evolve themselves i' the world, change wrong to
 right :

To have to do with nothing but the true,
 The good, the eternal—and these, not alone 2090
 In the main current of the general life,
 But small experiences of every day,
 Concerns of the particular hearth and home :
 To learn not only by a comet's rush
 But a rose's birth,—not by the grandeur, God— 2095
 But the comfort, Christ. All this, how far away !
 Mere delectation, meet for a minute's dream !—
 Just as a drudging student trims his lamp,
 Opens his Plutarch, puts him in the place
 Of Roman, Grecian ; drawsthe patched gown close, 2100
 Dreams, “Thus should I fight, save or rule the
 world !”—
 Then smilingly, contentedly, awakes
 To the old solitary nothingness.
 So I, from such communion, pass content . . .
 O great, just, good God ! Miserable me ! 2105

